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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
Third Sunday of Advent, Confirmation Sunday, December 13, 2015  
Texts: Selected verses from Proverbs 8 and John 1; Matthew 13:53-54;  
Also parables from Matthew and Luke

## O Wisdom

### *Scripture*

Our scripture this morning weaves together two poetic passages, from Proverbs 8 and from the Prologue of John with a little snippet from Matthew. Listen for God's word.

I, wisdom, live with prudence,  
and I attain knowledge and discretion.  
The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of long ago.  
Ages ago I was set up,  
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God.**

When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs abounding with water.  
Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth—  
When he established the heavens, I was there,  
then I was beside him, like a master worker;

**All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.**

And I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race.

**What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us.**

When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place. He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom...?"

## *Sermon*

Our confirmands this morning vowed to be disciples of Jesus. Confirmands, you'll spend the rest of your life figuring out what that means and discovering just who Jesus is. We have this Advent been considering various names for Jesus drawn from an ancient church liturgy called the O antiphons which were, in turn, drawn from scripture. Today we come to "O Wisdom."

You're familiar, I hope, with Michelangelo's famous fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of the creation of Adam. One of God's arms stretches forth, giving life to the first human. But God's other arm embraces the figure of Wisdom. As we heard from our scripture reading, in the book of Proverbs Wisdom was poetically envisioned as present at creation, working alongside of God making the world. The writer of the Gospel of John follows this wisdom tradition, identifying the Wisdom or Word of God, which called forth creation, with Jesus, the Word made flesh. So we've got Jesus as the embodiment of divine wisdom.

But what fascinates me more than this theological concept of Jesus as Pre-existent Divine Wisdom Itself, is the fact that Jesus was a teacher of wisdom. He was a sage. He taught about how to live life well. He called living life well participating in the Kingdom of God. The wisdom he taught is often unconventional. For example, he said, "You must lose your life to save it" and "Blessed are the poor." He was famous for his pithy sayings and especially his parables.

Parables are short, memorable stories that make a point. They use familiar images in a striking way. In these stories Jesus conveyed the wisdom that maybe God isn't quite what we assume and maybe life in God's kingdom operates differently from life in this world. I wondered what some of his parables might look like with a fresh coat of paint, particularly holiday paint. I had fun recasting about a dozen of the nearly forty that are recorded. So here goes a little bit of Jesus' wisdom reimagined for the season<sup>i</sup>---

Listen! A florist ordered a tractor trailer load of Christmas cactuses. He had a grand time delivering them willy-nilly around town whistling carols as he went. He rang doorbells and gave them to surprised pensioners, debutants, and kids alike. If no one was at home, he left them on porches, in apartment building hallways, and beside garages. Some of the cactuses died because they were never brought inside and froze. Some died because they were zealously over watered. Others died because the cat chewed on them. But some, which were put in sunny windows and lovingly tended bloomed profusely, not just that Christmas but for years to come. *A few notes of... Hark the Herald Angels Sing, (Matthew 13:1-9)*

For it is as if on Christmas Eve three parcels were delivered to the home of three boys. The cards were signed by their rich eccentric uncle who lived far away. They read, "Have fun with this! Merry Christmas!" For the boy who loved to write there was a brand new lap top and a card with the name of a literary agent. For the boy who loved animals there was a crate with a fine Labrador Retriever. And for the boy who was musical there was an old violin. The first boy got busy and published the Great American Novel to wide acclaim. The second loved that dog, bred her, sold half her pups for a handsome sum and trained the other half to be service dogs. The third boy took the violin to his teacher who immediately recognized it as a Stradivarius. The boy was so scared he might damage the valuable instrument he quickly put it in the case and on his closet shelf. The next Christmas Eve the uncle made a visit to his nephews. The first produced his novel and the second a photo album of the dogs, both of which pleased the uncle

very much. The third boy ran and got the violin case. Blowing of the dust, he announced, "Here it is, safe and sound!" "You foolish boy!" bellowed the uncle. "Don't you know that it's ruined now? If you don't play a violin like this, it becomes forever worthless." That boy went to his room in tears as the other two went off with their uncle on a trip to Paris. *Little Drummer Boy, (Matthew 25:14-30)*

What's the kingdom of God like? It's like a computer virus a single kid planted that turned all the computer screens across the whole country red and green on December 25. Or it's like someone sneaking in to the social hall at the Baptist church and spiking the Christmas punch. *Joy to the World, (Luke 13:18-21)*

A famous New York ballet company had a nationwide recruiting campaign for dancers to dance in the Nutcracker. When they came to one city, an assistant at a children's dance academy said to her director, "I think we should only let children who have been dancing with us for three years or more audition." But the director said, "No. Let anyone who wants to audition. The New York judge can tell the good dancers from the bad. He knows what he is doing." *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, (Matthew 13:24-30, 47-50)*

A governor decided to throw a fancy Christmas party. Engraved invitations went out to all the bigwigs and major campaign donors across the state. But regrets came pouring in. So the governor had her social secretary call up people on the B list: county sheriffs, nonprofit heads, and preachers. But they, too, were busy and declined. By this time it was too late to cancel the caterer and the band. So the governor had all her staff from her chief assistant to the gardener get in cars and vans with instructions to drive around the capitol city and pick up anyone they could find. They came back with folks from the homeless shelter, street walkers, and a group of hoodlums shooting off illegal fire crackers. You never saw people enjoy a party so much! Too bad those other folks missed out on all the fun. *Jingle Bell Rock, (Luke 14:16-24)*

What do you think? A father had two sons. One Saturday morning he asked them to help him that afternoon get all the Christmas decorations out of the attic, erect the Christmas tree, and hang the colored lights on the outside of the house. One boy said, "Sorry, Dad. I have plans today." But later he changed his mind and showed up to help. The other said, "Sure, I'll help." But when the time came to do the work, he was nowhere to be found. Which one did what his father wanted? If you say the first, you'll understand why addicts and ne'er-do-wells are going into the kingdom of God first. *Deck the Halls, (Matthew 21:28-32)*

Ten little girls were excited to get to ride on Santa's float in the night time Christmas parade. They were dressed in snowflake costumes and were positioned around Santa's sleigh. They each brought their smart phones which they were to put on flashlight mode and wave around to give the effect of falling snow. However, the parade did not start on time because the man playing Santa was delayed in getting there. To pass the time, five of the girls took turns making up stories and playing tag. But the other five passed the time by using their phones to shop and watch videos. Hours passed. About the time the five girls whose phone batteries had run down went inside to recharge their batteries, Santa finally showed up. Much to their dismay, the float left without them and they did not get to be in the parade. *"Sleepers, Wake!" A Voice Astounds Us, (Matthew 25:1-13)*

At the Christmas Eve service one woman came early to usher. She prided herself on volunteering for every job at church. Another woman came late and slid in the pew beside the first woman. She hadn't darkened the door of a church in years. When the candles were passed out and the organist began playing "Silent Night," the first woman prayed, "Lord, these Christmas-and-Easter-only churchgoers are such phonies. Thank God I'm not like this woman beside me. Thanks to people like me who teach Sunday school and pay their pledge the church can be the church and have beautiful services like this one." Meanwhile the other woman prayed simply, "Lord, help me." You know what? She was the one whom God heard. Everybody who thinks they have it all together will be knocked down a few pegs, and those who know they need all the help they can get will be lifted up. *Silent Night, (Luke 18:9-14)*

The Kingdom of God is like a Salvation Army major who went to the labor pool at 10 a.m. on Black Friday and hired people to ring bells for \$10 an hour. He stationed them and their red donation kettles around town. But when he drove by the labor pool around noon he saw there were more people who had showed up looking for work. So he gave them bells and kettles, too, dropped them off at other stores saying, "I'll pay you what's right." When he swung by the labor pool at 3 pm and again at 7 pm, he did the same. At 8 p.m. he picked up all the bell ringers and took them back to the labor pool. He passed out their pay envelopes beginning with the latest hires. The ones who worked one hour opened their envelopes and found a crisp \$100 bill. "Whoo-hoo!" they shouted. Word spread quickly. Doing the math in their heads, the 3 p.m.ers figured they'd get \$500, the nooners, \$800 and the 10 a.m.ers a whopping \$1000! But each envelope contained \$100. Grumbles went down the line. One of the early birds stepped forward and said to the major. "It's not fair. We rung our arms off all day and these Johnny-come-latelys hardly got warmed up." The major replied, "Friend, I'm not cheating anyone here. Didn't you agree to \$10 an hour? Are you telling me I can't be generous? Now scam and have a Merry Christmas!" *Jolly Old St Nicholas, (Matthew 20:1-16)* ]

A teacher took 100 kindergarteners to the cinema complex to see the latest Christmas movie. After the show they waited in front for the buses to come pick them up. But counting noses, the teacher discovered that one child was missing. She left the 99 by themselves in the parking lot while she went back into the building to search for the one lost child. She looked in all the restrooms and dark theatres until she found him. She was so happy when she did that she told the bus drivers to make a surprise stop at Dairy Queen where she treated the whole bunch to ice cream sundaes. *Refrain O come O come Emmanuel, (Luke 15:3-7)*

A man loved to decorate for Christmas. He had an antique toy train that had belonged to his grandfather which he set up under his Christmas tree every year. It had an engine and ten cars. But one year, when he unpacked the set, one of the cars was missing. He went back up to the attic and looked through every empty box of Christmas decorations which he had already put away until he found the wayward car. He was so overjoyed that he called up all his neighbors—even the ones who hardly knew him—and had them over for eggnog. *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice, (Luke 15:8-10)*

A woman and her three children were en route to visit Grandmother for the holidays when she ran out of gas. She panicked when she discovered that in her haste she had left her pocketbook and cell phone at home. By chance a preacher drove by on his way to his church's

Christmas pageant. He slowed down but did not stop. Likewise a van full of carolers slowed down but did not stop. Finally a Muslim immigrant in a beat up truck had compassion and pulled over. After hearing the woman's plight, he drove to the nearest filling station, got a gas can of gas, brought it back, and put the gas in her tank. He pulled out his wallet and gave her eighty dollars saying, "Buy some gas and supper for your kids. And here's my phone. Call Grandmother and tell her you will be a little late." *O Come All Ye Faithful, (Luke 10:30-35)*

So, as Jesus wisely said, "Let those with ears hear!"

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<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to John Killinger for the concept of re-dressing Jesus' parables in holiday garb (see *Parables for Christmas*, Abingdon Press, 1985), though our imaginations took us in different directions for specific parables.