

TEXT: Psalm 90
THEME: A thousand years in God's sight is like yesterday
SUBJECT: Wisdom
TITLE: A Heart of Wisdom

24th Sunday after Pentecost
15 November 2020
Messiah Moravian
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Scott Sanders reflects on the experience of the birth of his granddaughter. He begins by remembering his own childhood. His family left a farm on the outskirts of Memphis in April of 1951. His memory is divided into *before* and *after*.

His mother had been happy on the farm and was miserable in the place to which they moved. She couldn't bear to go back and look at the farm. By the time they hunted up the old place, the farm had been turned into a subdivision and had been overrun by Memphis. Scott saw nothing he recognized.

It is often said a young child is like a sponge. Scott believes that is the wrong metaphor because a sponge can be wrung dry. A child is more like a forest, gathering every drop of rain or flake of snow, every fallen leaf, the slant of sunlight and glint of moonlight, the fluster of song birds, the paths worn by deer, the litter of nuts and seeds, and whatever the wind delivers, taking it all in, turning everything into new growth.

When Scott's own children were young enough for their ages to be reckoned in months and half years, he often thought, with a pang, how little of what they were experiencing they would ever be able to remember. He realized so many moments memorable to him—standing on a bridge overlooking a waterfall, holding Eva in his arms, feeling the thrum of the current through her body and his; laying on a blanket in the park next to Jesse, the two of them watching clouds by day and stars by night—these moments, so memorable to Scott, would vanish into Eva and Jesse, beyond recall.

As he now looks at his granddaughter, seven months old, he feels the pang again. Elizabeth gazes boldly at everyone she meets, without caring if they gaze back. She reaches for everything with the span of her arms, feeling it, gumming and licking it. She notices every sound, from a siren in the street to the cluck of a tongue. Her senses are like rivers pouring into her constantly, even in her sleep.

Scott's dearest wish for Elizabeth is that she will never lose touch with the wonder of being alive, that she will never cease to be amazed by the sensations flowing into her. He prays that she, along with all of us blessed with consciousness, will remain forever awake to the astounding *isness* of things.

Why this apple, say, gleaming in the sunlight on a pine table carved with lovers' initials, why this sound of a cello and fragrance of lavender filling the air, why this flow of breath, this mind

absorbing it all, this planet hurtling through space, this universe unfolding? The moment we begin taking this skein of miracles for granted, we cease to live, no matter if our hearts still beat.

Wisdom is born of staying awake to the astounding *isness* of things. *What* something is—an apple, a cello, a brain, a planet, a cosmos—is what biology, musicology, physiology, physics, cosmology can teach us. *That* these things exist, that there is something rather than nothing, poses a question beyond the reach of these disciplines. The question of existence (*isness*) is real, comprehensible, and unavoidable, and yet it lies beyond to power of naturalism or the sciences to answer.

The ultimate source of *existence* cannot be some item or event that has long since passed away or concluded, like a venerable ancestor or even the Big Bang itself, but must be a constant wellspring of being, at work even now. The metaphor all the great religious traditions seem to share is that of the relation of a candle's or lamp's flame to the light it casts out into a room at night: should the flame be extinguished, in that very instant the room would fall dark.

David Bentley Hart explains: “All finite things are always, in the present, being sustained in existence by conditions that they cannot have supplied for themselves. Nowhere in finite things is a source of existence as such.” (If you want a fuller explanation, see Hart's *God:Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. It is a brilliant explanation of what the major religions of the world mean when they say “God.”) Or, as Simone Weil put it: “Every existing thing is equally upheld in its existence by God's creative love.”

In the language of the Book of Common Prayer: “We live and move and have our being in God.” Psalm 90 says it poetically: “Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or the land and the earth were born, from age to age you are God. . . .A thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past and like a watch in the night . . . The span of our life is seventy years, perhaps in strength even eighty . . . So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.”

Wisdom, the Psalmist believes, arises from recognizing our finitude. The length of human life is 70 or 80 years at best. With the blink of an eye, a life is gone. For the Hebrew “the heart” was the center of the will or intellect. The prayer for a wise heart is for the ability to reflect on such a short life and to be able to live fully. The petition is for the wisdom to discern the significance of human experience.

The basic limitation of our lives is that they have a fixed span; we exist between birth and death. We have a limited share in the existence of God's creation. This limitation is also our unique opportunity: we *exist*. We exist in a fleeting moment of eternity. Only on this one occasion can this gift of life be valued or despised, used or misused. Remaining awake to the wonder of being alive, to the astounding *isness* of things, to the passing nature of our existence, is how we gain a heart of wisdom.

The time in which we live is our place. I remember a middle-aged woman telling me she believed she was born out of her time; her place, she believed, was the Victorian era, 19th century England. Our place may be a modest place, but it is ours. It is our place in the cosmos and in history, and the particular place where we are called to do the work entrusted to us. In this present time we have a unique opportunity, and since we do not know how long it will last we must seize it and use it. The parable of the talents in the Gospel reading for today (Matthew 25:14-30) is to this point.

Wisdom is born of wonder at being alive. The heart grows in wisdom when it sees its limited time as a unique opportunity. The heart opens wide when it becomes aware that the cosmos and history, and with them our own existence in this time and place, are claimed by the fact that the God of the cosmos and of history is our gracious God from whom we truly have our being and to whom we truly go.

PRAYER: St Gregory of Nazianzos (330-389) his writings helped establish what is now considered the heart of Orthodox theology and spirituality. Translation by Scott Cairns

And even now—as, say, within
a forest clearing, rain-laced air combines
with sun's bright energies to spin
the many-colored rainbow, and so extend
illuminating elements in an arc
to span great distances—just so
the energies exuding from the One
Great Light insist on reaching
with its rays every lesser intellect.

He is—we are quite right to say—
the fountain of all lights, and sends
them flowing without fail, especially
the Light we cannot name, nor grasp,
the Light eluding all reductive terms,
forever racing far beyond our wits,
so that, with strong desire, we
might struggle all the more to touch
what extends so far beyond us.