

HOUSE OF WISDOM
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, the sheep and the cattle, too. He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

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Whatever else Christianity may be it evolved out of Judaism. And whatever else Judaism may be it is an ancient wisdom tradition, which flowered about the same time as Buddhism and Taoism, approximately 500 BCE (Before the Common Era). Those three traditions have little or no interest in the so-called "afterlife." Their focus is on living fully and well in the present, here and now.

Judaism arose out of a few basic ideas none of which pertain to making a deal with God in order to gain heaven or avoid hell after death. That notion is invasive, not indigenous, arriving much later.

The notion of heaven and hell gained prominence in the Middle Ages due to certain entrenched religious interests eager to exploit ignorant people and steal money out of their pocketbooks. Lots of money. Money for cathedrals. Money for bishops. Money for priests. *A little more money, honey, and your aunt Metilda will waltz right out of purgatory.*

It still works today. People still think they have to make a deal with God. *If you don't accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, some Christians say, you will burn forever in Hell because Jesus is THE way, the truth and the life.*

That threat convinces a lot of people to submit to persistent evangelists or neighbors. Yes, it's a form of Christianity. But it's also a form of control, and it's a long ways from the heart of Christianity. It is not part of the formative ideas in this wisdom tradition to which Presbyterianism links us.

What are the formative ideas upon which this tradition grows and builds?

At the foundation of our wisdom tradition is a tripartite idea: One, the world is good. Two, we mess up terribly. And three, there is still a lot of good work to be done.

As humans arose out of the animal world one of our first existential questions was about the mysterious forces within the natural world. Is it or are they malignant, benign, or indifferent? As language and cultures evolved, different names and characteristics would be and still are applied to that "Mystery beyond words and comprehension."

Our wisdom tradition affirms that, even when your eyes or mind tells you otherwise, that mysterious power is good. It cares. It is not against us. It is not indifferent. It is for us. Behold and believe!

A thousand years later that idea would be echoed in a peculiar and culturally dated Christian creed: *I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.* Or, as we might say today: I give my heart to the One who is making heaven and earth.

That's part one of this tripartite idea. The world is good. That foundational idea is portrayed in an anthem of praise to the natural world in Genesis 1, the first chapter in our scriptural tradition.

But our great ancestors were not fools. As anyone can see, all is not well on planet earth. So who is to blame for the moral mess?

Our wisdom tradition answers: human beings. You and me. And not just some of us. All of us are complicit in destructive behavior against the earth, its creatures, and ourselves. We all descend from Adam and Eve, not literally, but spiritually. We are one family susceptible to the same depravities. So don't act like you're innocent. Be humble. Be honest. Confess. Daily.

The universal human predicament is dramatically portrayed in a series of folk tales, poetic vignettes, found in Genesis 2-11.

Genesis 2. The profound and human longing for companionship is portrayed in the humorous but poignant tale of the "rib." We long for love and acceptance.

Genesis 3. Adam and Eve, personifications of all humans, won't allow anything, not even God, to stop their quest for knowledge. Humans have an insatiable thirst for more.

Genesis 4. Cain kills Abel and, as it turns out, the rest of us kill Jesus and other innocent victims over and over again because of a sinister malignancy in the human heart as mysteriously present as anything else in this world. That Word of judgment doesn't come from the natural world. That Word, or insight, arises in the human heart and is spoken by prophets, poets and sages. We mess up. Terribly.

That's the second part of this tripartite idea. It, too, is echoed in Christian creeds: *I believe in Jesus who was crucified*, by which we mean in part: we crucify and are crucified in more ways than one. And so I give my heart to Jesus, fully divine, fully human, so much like us, tempted, tried, tired, frazzled, fragile, hungry, thirsty, aching, and yet ready to mend hearts and this world one touch at a time.

Jesus made no deals with God. Jesus lived in true communion with God and true community with others. Like Jesus, we are with God even in "Hell," even in the darkness. I give my heart to this One who is all I am meant to be.

The third aspect of this tripartite idea is this: No one has the right to sit down and feel hopeless or wallow in guilt. There's too much good work to be done and a lot of good life to be enjoyed on this planet in the few days given—gifted—to us.

It's true: the natural world should, if it had a mind of its own, expel us as despicable toxins on the planet. But, guess what? The Spirit of life loves us and keeps us within the web of life to do our part. I mean, without us who would take photographs of fledgling eagles, write music, and sing praises. And who else can move the evolutionary momentum above mere biology into a dimension where survival of the fittest is transmuted into compassion for the weak and marginalized? We have creative and redemptive work to do in order to build and preserve community with all of life.

And so we affirm: *I believe in the Holy Spirit*. We give our hearts to the Spirit that continually forms and reforms communities of diverse people, animals and vegetation. We give our hearts to the promise we inherit from Abraham, Sarah and Hagar—a promise that someday humans will find a way to transcend vicious tribalism in order to bless the world. That fitful, fledgling promise is portrayed in Genesis 12. It's a snapshot of evolution within human consciousness: perhaps we can love others and not just our own. WOW. What a world that would be!

Jesus was a child of this wisdom tradition. And if you have eyes to see, you can see Christ's gospel in Genesis 1-12. I believe Jesus saw it there.

He also saw how it had lost its way in a self-serving system built on making deals with God. Jesus flat out stopped the trafficking in the Temple that supported sacrifices based on winning God's favor. *"Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"*

What would Jesus sweep out of Christianity these days?

Our relationship with God is not a "market," where we can buy God's approval with the right sacrifice or deeds or confession or belief. God's grace is a free gift. Our inner Temple should be empty, where there is simply space for being present with the Present One. It is not a market, but a house, where we are simply together. (Pastor Steve Garnes-Holmes)

Jesus did not build a house of bloody horrors. Jesus purged and renovated an ancient house of wisdom. I'm thinking and hoping we can too.