Jan L. Richardson

In Wisdom’s Path

Discovering the Sacred in Every Season
JAN L. RICHARDSON

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Come to Wisdom with all your soul,
and keep her ways with all your might.
Search out and seek, and she will
become known to you,
and when you get hold of her,
do not let her go.
For at last you will find the rest she gives,
and she will be changed into joy for you.

—Sirach 6:26–28

No language about God will ever be fully adequate
to the burning mystery which it signifies.
But a more inclusive way of speaking can come about
that bears the ancient wisdom with a new justice.

—Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is

There is a pearl in every season. Find it.
Then give all you have to claim it.

—Joan Sauro, C.S.J., Whole Earth Meditation
The image on the slide screen was cavernous and beckoning. As the gathering in the San Pedro chapel took in the translucent greens and blues of the watercolor, we heard its artist, Sister Doris Klein, C.S.A., offer these words: “In the cave of our hearts . . . in the fabric of our lives . . . in the soul of our earth . . . you continue, O God, to be born!”

She held the opinion, she said, that Christ was born in a cave. “We all carry a cave,” Sister Doris reflected, “a hidden place within us, into which God longs to be born.” She told us that Advent is a season to enter that place, to turn inward and encounter the God who seeks to emerge through us.

During the four years that I served as a church pastor, Advent was my busiest season. This past Advent, my first since moving from St. Luke’s, was radically different. After a full autumn, my schedule actually slowed down with the onset of Advent. I began to savor the quietness and slowness of the days—taking walks, reading, making notes for a new book, working at my drafting table. Yet I found myself not feeling terribly Adventish.

Into the midst of this came Sister Doris. As I pondered the image and listened to her words, I realized that in the slowness of the days and the quiet of the season, Advent had been unfolding for me after all.

Shortly after this, I began to reread Meinrad Craighead’s book *The Litany of the Great River*. I found myself startled as I came upon a section in which she writes about the cave of the heart. Building her art studio in the Rio Grande Valley with a friend one winter, Craighead thought of the bears that at the same time were gestating their cubs in their mountain caves during the dark season of hibernation. “God lies in the details,” she would repeat to herself in her own season of creating. “God lies in the details of all growth and making. I was building my cave, my place to withdraw and hide, the sanctuary where I would birth my images and find God lying in the details.”

The ancient writers spoke of Wisdom as an initiate in the mysteries of God’s knowledge. This is the sort of wisdom we may find in the cave of the heart. When we turn inward, when we give ourselves to the shadows of unknowing, when we open ourselves to God, we are met by One who will be a companion in the mystery and the darkness. This One will also help us know what lies for us beyond the cave. That is the other piece of it: the cave of the heart is not a permanent dwelling but a necessary shelter along the way. As an initiate in God’s mysteries, Wisdom participates in God’s work. We, too, are called: to enter the cave of the heart, to trace the images drawn on its walls, to find God lying in the details of our lives, and then to emerge with newfound wisdom to engage in God’s work.
ome families remember the stories of Advent through keeping the tradition of the Jesse tree, a small tree decorated with ornaments that symbolize the ancestors of Christ. Although this was not part of my tradition, somewhere along the way I became aware of the practice. I also learned that the symbols adorning the branches of the Jesse tree usually represent the male ancestors of Christ more than his female ancestors, presumably because the stories and the lists of begats in the Scriptures tell us much more about the men than the women. The women were there, however, a significant but often hidden stream surfacing occasionally in stories and in places such as the genealogy that opens Matthew’s Gospel. Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary, the writer reminds us: their stories, too, ran in Jesus’ veins.

Thinking of them, I began to imagine another tree, one that grows in a hidden grove, tended by those who know the place. The tree has been nourished by the blood of birthing and by the tears of women who struggled for life. The fires meant to destroy it have thickened its trunk and opened its seeds, which the Spirit has spread to the four corners of the earth. Holding the moon in its arms and the sun in its branches, the tree is witness to the cycles of seasons and the turning of years. I am rooted here, drawing on the strength of generations, listening to the whispered stories in the rustling of leaves. Here all the unremembered, unrecorded names have been traced into the bark. Here the tree grows strong, nourished at the mother root.

Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary

Wisdom of blood,
flow through me;
promise of seed,
unfold in me;
endurance of story,
speak through me;
spiral of time,
remember me.

Wisdom of earth,
take root in me;
strength of fire,
enliven me;
power of wind,
blow through me;
blessing of rain,
fall on me.

In Wisdom’s Path

Advent
when I first saw this figure, its arms outstretched, I thought of resurrection, of Christ emerging from the tomb. As I worked with it, the awareness began to settle in that the shape is not a silhouette but a shadow. I remembered learning as a child how sometimes we can see things more clearly with our peripheral vision than by looking straight on; how stars, for instance, may reveal themselves to the corner of one’s eye more easily than to the center. Sometimes we can come to know a thing only by averting our gaze, by not shocking it with the full force of our looking. Some things, too, long to be known first in shadow. I think that God is sometimes like this: teasing, dancing on the edges of our awareness. I think God does this not because God is mean or coy but because God longs to be courted, to dwell in a mystery that keeps us aching to touch the skin beneath the shadow.

I have sought you in daylight
as if the discovery of you
would not scorch my eyes,
singe their lashes,
sear their brows;
as if your gaze
would not unface me,
lay bare every longing,
devastate all my knowing.

And here you are,
teasing the corner of my eye,
offering peripheral visions,
knowing
that what can’t be borne in sunlight
may still be known in shadow.
forty days after Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph went to the Temple for the presentation of Jesus and the purification of Mary, as was the Jewish custom following a birth. Luke’s Gospel tells of their welcome by the prophet Anna and by Simeon, both of whom had long awaited this child. Upon seeing Jesus, Simeon takes him into his arms and speaks of him as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” Because of Simeon’s words about light, this day—called the Feast of the Presentation or the Feast of the Purification of Mary—became in many places a day to bless the candles that would be used in the coming year. In England, this candlelight service became known as the “Candle Mass,” giving rise to the name Candlemas.

In Alexander Carmichael’s notes to the *Carmina Gadelica*, a remarkable collection of blessings, prayers, hymns, and incantations that Carmichael gathered in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the nineteenth century, he writes, “It is said in Ireland that Bride [St. Brigid] walked before Mary with a lighted candle in each hand when she went up to the Temple for purification. The winds were strong on the Temple heights, and the tapers were unprotected, yet they did not flicker nor fail.” Carmichael observes that because of this, Brigid is called *Bride boillsge* (Brigid of brightness) and that some call this day *La Fheill Bride nan Coinnle* (the Feast Day of Brigid of the Candles) or, more commonly, *La Fheill Moire nan Coinnle*—the Feast Day of Mary of the Candles.

Bless those
who know the darkness
and do not fear it,

who carry the light
and are not consumed,

who prepare the way
and will not abandon it,

who bless with grace
that does not leave us.
A recurring dream began to visit me a couple of years ago. Some of the details change, but the essence remains the same: I am wandering through shops—not a mall, but a series of connected stores. They are stores of the sort I love to browse through, the kind I find in communities that value artistry. I savor what I see as I wander through the stores: richly hued artwork, finely crafted jewelry, beautiful pottery that calls out for me to touch and hold it.

I always find a bookstore in the dream. One time it was a used bookstore, crammed with volumes and with more shelves around every turn. Another time it contained a case of gorgeous hand-bound books, displayed like artwork. I marveled at the colors, textures, and designs, knowing as I touched the books, I want to do this, to create volumes like these.

One of the things that intrigues me about the recurring dream is that it almost always begins with my walking down a familiar street. I turn a corner and suddenly find myself at the shops, thinking to myself, Of course—that’s where they were! They lay in my neighborhood the whole time, waiting to be found.

Giver of the dream, this I ask:

for courage
to take the paths
the feet of my soul
have always known;

for vision
to see the wonders
the eyes of my longing
would never forget;

for stillness
to hear the song
the ear of my spirit
will ever remember;

for daring
to taste the delights
the tongue of my heart
forever recalls;

for wisdom
to touch the depths
the hands of my desire
could never erase.

Dream waiting to be found.
And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

—Mark 1:12–13

I had intended for the space in the center of this piece to be solid black, but there was grit in the ink. When I pulled the print from the inked glass, stars emerged. I thought of Jesus in the wilderness, for forty days and nights coming face-to-face with the essence of who he was. In other gospel accounts of this story, the writers include the questions that Satan poses to Jesus. Designed to entice and distract him, the questions have the converse effect of helping to clarify what lies at Jesus’ core.

Humans do not live by bread alone. Jesus said in that wilderness. But I imagine angel-borne bread at the end of those forty days, coming to ease his hunger, to sustain him for the path ahead.

I am not asking you
to take this wilderness from me,
to remove this place of starkness
where I come to know
the wildness within me,
where I learn to call the names
of the ravenous beasts
that pace inside me,
to finger the brambles
that snake through my veins,
to taste the thirst
that tugs at my tongue.

But send me
tough angels,
sweet wine,
strong bread:
just enough.
Holy Week: Good Friday
(At the Cross)

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.”

And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

—Mark 15:33–41
Perhaps they wondered
why I was not surprised
when they told of how
the curtain had been torn.
But I had known
the exact moment of the rending.
It started at my heart
and did not stop
until it had reached my womb,
and the holy of holies
lay bare and bleeding
with a gash
no one else could see.
Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her servant girls, she calls from the highest places in town, "You that are simple, turn in here!"

To those without sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight."

—Proverbs 9:1–6
Are these people you know?” a friend asked when she saw this collage. Yes and no. When I first began working on this image, I wanted to set the table with familiar faces. But with only thirteen places, how could I choose? The guest list for my dream feast would be enormously long, more than one table could hold. I didn’t want to leave anyone out.

Yet these folks, Wisdom’s dinner guests, are familiar to me. The spirits and some of the physical features of people who have shared my journey found their way into this piece. The figures evoke various family members, friends, and companions, those known to me as well as those I hope to cross paths with one day.

As I worked on this collage, I was visited by memories of wise companions and of tables we have shared. In this spiraling journey, one of the gifts that has sustained me most has been the breaking of bread, the opportunity to linger at the table with folks who have accompanied me along the way. I made this for two friends in particular who have taught me a great deal about feasting. They have shown me, again and again, that where there is bread and wine and friendship, there is holy ground.

To your table
you bid us come.
You have set the places,
you have poured the wine,
and there is always room,
you say,
for one more.

And so we come.
From the streets
and from the alleys
we come.

From the deserts
and from the hills
we come.

From the ravages of poverty
and from the palaces of privilege
we come.

Running,
limping,
carried,
we come.

We are bloodied with our wars,
we are wearied with our wounds,
we carry our dead within us,
and we reckon with their ghosts.

We hold the seeds of healing,
we dream of a new creation,
we know the things
that make for peace,
and we struggle
to give them wings.

And yet, to your table
we come.
Hungering for your bread,
we come;
thirsting for your wine,
we come;
singing your song
in every language,
speaking your name
in every tongue,
in conflict and in communion,
in discord and in desire,
we come,
O God of Wisdom,
we come.
Jan L. Richardson is an artist, writer, and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. She serves as director of The Wellspring Studio, LLC, and travels as a retreat leader and conference speaker. Widely known for such books as *Night Visions* and *In the Sanctuary of Women*, Richardson lives in Florida with her husband, the singer/songwriter Garrison Doles.

You can find Richardson’s distinctive artwork, writing, and more at her blogs and websites:

*The Painted Prayerbook*
paintedprayerbook.com

*The Advent Door*
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