

THE WAY OF WISDOM
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32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-14

Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her. She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate.

Joshua 24:16-18

Then the people answered, Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for the LORD is our God.

Matthew 25:5-8

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him. Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out!

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This past Wednesday morning I got up as usual at 5:00 while it was still dark. As it turns out it, for some people in our parish that particular Wednesday morning following Tuesday's election results was darker than usual.

I'll get to that in a moment.

Anyway, I first read the top stories in the *Martinsburg Journal* and the *New York Times* as I usually do. Then I read a chapter from a new book by Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*.

Then I moved from my reading chair to my desk, turned on my computer, opened my email inbox and found this. "Hey pastor, I confess I am disheartened this morning to say the least. I need to hear some words of hope. And, you are so good at that. Any words of wisdom for me this morning?"

Well, that told me three things I didn't know before. One: I possess words of wisdom. Two: I groove on hope. And the third thing I learned was that this particular parishioner is a Democrat.

So what do you say to a Democrat the day after the apocalypse? Well, wouldn't you know, it's the same thing I've had to say to disheartened Republicans in other election cycles.

So on this particular post election Wednesday, here's what I told that Democrat, that disheartened, disappointed, depressed, disillusioned, discouraged, despairing, dangling Democrat.

With all due respect to John Lennon—I read the news today, oh boy, about a lucky man who made the grade and then another and another and then another until the Republicans had both the House and Senate.

Yep, I read the news today, I told that deflated soul.

And while reading the news in the dark, I noticed something. The sun peeked over the horizon. The red cardinal outside my window chirped cheerfully (but then I've always suspected that red bird was Republican).

Then other birds in the woods, outside my window, joined the chorus and I know at least three fourths of those birds are Democrats. Then the pileated woodpecker tore into what's left of my fascia board like a jackhammer. I don't know, but I'm pretty sure that pecker is an Independent.

Then our dogs Lucy and Rita woke up, stirred to life, ambled to the back door wagging their tails, as though that day was no different than yesterday or the day before or the day before that. I began to suspect they must know something we don't. Or more likely don't know things we know, and therefore have no dread of what the future may be. But then my dogs aren't political. They're Buddhists. They live in the moment, not in dread of what might be.

And once the words “dread of what might be” popped into my head, I thought of Wendell Berry's “The Peace of Wild Things.” And so I sent it along with these other observations to that disheartened Democrat who was longing for hope and words of wisdom.

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

So, if you're looking for hope, or longing for words of wisdom, I'd say that Wendell Berry piece is pretty good. It may not be everything you need. But it's plenty good enough most of the time. The way of wisdom is, in part, the way of contentment, a way of simply fitting into the wondrous web of life, accepting our place in the great scheme of things still unfolding after 4.5 billion years. What's the worry? Really.

What I am and what I have today, that's enough. So be it. Let it be.

Wednesday morning I didn't have a sermon in mind. But the request to supply words of wisdom got me thinking about wisdom and wouldn't you know it, wisdom shows up in the appointed lessons for today in several ways.

There's the Wisdom of Solomon, of course. But you can see it in the Old Testament lesson and gospel as well. To the people of Israel on the verge of entering the Promise Land—not unlike how we face the Promise of Love daily—Joshua said: choose whom or what you will serve this day. There's a choice to be made. To what will you give your ultimate allegiance?

In that context it was about God and gods and various values to which people can give their hearts. *Do not*, said Joshua in so many words (which take a bit of translating and

interpreting), *give your heart to that which is not worthy of your heart.*

Yes, it was a different context, different particularities then. But for us it's still a choice. We can choose the way of wisdom that leads to life in more ways than one. Or the way of foolishness that leads to death in more ways than one. All may be one now and in the end. But there's more than one path. Which will we choose?

It's not so much about right and wrong as it is about good or not so good; about being kind or not so kind; about benefiting many or benefiting just a few. There really are two different ways of living. One is the religion of being right. The other is the religion of being kind.

In the gospel lesson for today, the bridesmaids had a choice. The wise ones were ready with oil for their lamps. To be wise means, in part, to be ready, to be awake and alert when opportunities arise. Because certain doors don't stay open forever.

But wisdom isn't everything. It's also important to be kind. What if those five wise maidens had shared just a little of what they had with the others? Then their five friends could have joined the festivities as well.

Life can be about punishing others for being wrong or it can be about helping others, about excluding or including. Will our choices benefit many, or just a few?

What will our national leaders choose? To benefit many or benefit just a few?

And what will you choose when you have such a choice to make?

As it turns out, it's far better to be kind than to be right. And if the way of wisdom doesn't include compassion, then we are flying with only one wing and you can be sure that won't carry us very far.

The way of wisdom is not hard to find. Wisdom is looking for us. Our job is to be awake and not close the door.