

“By Night”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

1 Kings 3:5-12

October 28, 2018

Reformation Sunday

“At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night.”

So many weird and wild questions and declarations happen at night in our holy scriptures. In the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve are hiding from God because they'd been naughty, God takes a walk in the garden “at the time of the evening breeze” and God calls out, “Where are you?”

After wrestling with Jacob through the night, the angel of God asks to be let go as morning approaches, and Jacobs says, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And the angel asks, “What is your name?”

The Passover happens at midnight, bringing death and chaos in Egypt, and Pharaoh summons Moses in the night and says, “Get outta here!”

Samuel was sleeping in the temple when he heard his named being called, and finally, on the fourth try, God gets an answer: “Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Shepherds were watching over their flocks by night, and suddenly there's an angel who says, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...” And the multitude of the heavenly host arrives: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”

On the night of his arrest, Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it, and then he took the cup, and he told them of the new covenant. Later that evening:

“When he reached the place, he said to them, ‘Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’ Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.’”

In a dark courtyard with a fire at the center, Peter denied and denied and then denied again just as morning broke.

In the dark of night. When owls watch and things move in the shadows. Those hours when people with mysterious jobs are the only ones awake, aside from those who are up to no good and those who are wrestling with angels and demons and new realities. The time of dreams and visions and blurry, holy conversations.

I had a dream this week. But I was at Homewood instead of Gibeon, so I guess that messed things up. Instead of God telling me to ask for something, I dreamt that a member of this congregation had won over a billion dollars with a lottery ticket. I won't tell you who it was, but the dream visitor said, “Hey Joe, this is Stewart. You can rest easy about the budget tonight.”

The budget seems so trivial this week. It's been hard to rest easy. This is the week in which the President of the United States endorsed nationalism, pipe bombs were sent through the mail to the

the leadership of one of our political parties, and worshipers at a synagogue in Pittsburgh were murdered and police officers were shot in yet another gun rampage. I was four-years-old when President Reagan's reelection campaign told us it was "morning again in America." It's not just Halloween that's making it feel like the witching hour here in 2018.

By night, King Solomon asked for wisdom, and this pleased God. Solomon wanted understanding and the ability to tell good from evil. He didn't ask for long life or wealth or vengeance, and so God gave him immense wisdom like never seen before or since.

He did great things. He built the temple. He made strategic alliances. He carried out justice through his wisdom. He loved his God. Solomon is lifted up in scripture so many times as an example and a hero. He is in the lineage of Jesus. His name meant *peace*. Solomon was faithful, and his wisdom prevailed, and things went well for him. But then, there's the rest of the story.

King Solomon was the last King of Israel to reign over a united monarchy. He got himself into trouble by treating women as chattel and giving into the trappings of regal excess and absolute power. He betrayed the wisdom given to him and worshiped other gods, bringing divine wrath. After Solomon, the kingdom was divided and the list of kings that follows can be broken down into a few of the halfway decent, mostly the very corrupt, and then a good handful of the voraciously wicked. And after these kings, there was exile.

Wisdom is what we are supposed to want. And it slips through our fingers so easily the moment we reach for what it brings.

Today we celebrate the spirit of the Reformation. We see wisdom in the call to not take institutions and rules for granted, but instead to constantly reevaluate. We seek to have the church, the world, and our own lives re-formed, according to the Word of God. The Reformers saw a church that was not simply a broken body, but a system *set up for corruption*. With wisdom, they brought deeply needed change, and some put their lives on the line in faithfulness.

And, we must remember, the Reformers were broken too. John Calvin and pals tried to convince the government of Geneva to only *behead* Spanish theologian and physician Michael Servetus for heresy, instead of burning him on a pyre of his own books — which is what happened to him in the end. But at the end of the day, Calvin felt the punishment fit the crime. Martin Luther was part of a long history of anti-Semitism in the Church which, as we know, has not been eradicated. Wisdom is granted, but God continues to have to work with people who have a taste for violence and power and the destruction of other people.

Every Saturday night I check the news to see if I need to completely revamp my sermon. And I'm up before the sun on Sunday, and I take one last peek, just to be sure something completely horrible hasn't happened while the congregation slept. *The night is dark and full of terrors.*

And yet...

"Where are you?"

"What is your name?"

"Speak, for your servant is listening."

"Ask what I should give you."

"Do not be afraid...I am bringing you good news of great joy..."

"This is my body...this cup is the new covenant."

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed...”

The night is sacred and ripe for faithfulness. The people of God know about the darkness. They have seen miracles in it. I refuse to believe that the only response that we can muster is “We are sending our thoughts and prayers” and then forgetting about those prayers and going back to normal life. That is not the way of the wisest ruler in history. That is not the way of courageous reformers. That is the casual dismissal of licentious kings and clerics who have found their own heretics to execute.

There is a holy word to be heard in our troubled generation. Should we be apt to dream and able to listen, and should we be blessed to hear “ask what I should give you” — for what wisdom will we ask? And how will we hold onto it?

Amen.