Wisdom for a Long Night

Proper 27, Year A — November 8, 2026

We've had some sleepless nights this week.
Thunder. Lightning. Torrential rain. And the flooding.
Rainfall records were shattered.
Some of us were trapped inside our own homes.
The Gospel today is about another long night.
See how it compares to your own this week.
We begin… with a Wedding… and it's running late.
If you've ever sat in church, all dressed up, watching the clock,
you know it's true.
The organist has played everything he knows. Twice.
The flower girl is sound asleep on grandma's lap.
Somebody whispers, "Where is he?"
Some people shrug. Some people shake their heads.
And then… finally… the doors open…
and everybody remembers why they came.
Jesus told a story about the late start at another wedding.
He's sitting with his disciples, just days before his arrest.
And they ask the tough question…
The one that faithful people have asked for centuries: When?
When does this all come right?
When does God finish what God started?
And Jesus answers with a story… about waiting.
Paul's church in Thessalonica asked the same thing.
First Thessalonians may be the oldest Christian writing we have. Those people were worried about something very specific.
Some of their little congregation had died.
And the Lord had not yet come.
Had the ones who died missed it?

"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,
about those who have died,
so that you may not grieve as others do
who have no hope."

Every Sunday, in the Prayers of the People, we pray these words: "Jesus, help us to follow you in love, wisdom, and courage."
We've prayed them for a couple of years now.
And I admit. I've spent a great deal of time on the first word. Love.
I could preach about love until the cows come home.
And I probably have.
And far less time on the second word. Wisdom.
Some of you know I found those three words in a book.
I was watching an NFL Wild Card playoff game a couple of years ago
when the cameras zoomed in on a Philadelphia Eagles player on the sideline.
He was reading a book.
The commentators were shocked.
Nobody had ever seen an NFL player read a book during a game.
I got a copy. Inner Excellence, by Jim Murphy.
It changed my life. That summer, I shared it with the vestry,
and endorsed it as our mission.
It's a self-help book that says you cannot help yourself.
It's a Christian walk without a word about Jesus.
This morning's Scripture readings hand us the second word…
I think the parable is about nothing else.
Wisdom.
And it links beautifully to the third word. Courage.
Wisdom without courage is not wisdom at all.
So what is wisdom, exactly?
Some think wisdom is intelligence.

The degrees. The test scores. The people who know a lot.
Some think wisdom is street smarts.
Reading the room, never getting taken, looking out for number one.
Both are real gifts. Neither one is what the Bible means.
Intelligence knows. Street smarts survives.
But biblical wisdom is much greater.
In Hebrew, it's hokmah. In Greek is sophia.
They mean… skilled at living.

And it's a really old idea…

Being skilled at living.

In the book of Exodus,
the same word describes the artisans who built the tabernacle. Weavers. Metalworkers. People skillful of heart.
Wisdom is a craftsman's kind of knowing.
How to live well in the world God made.
Going with the grain, instead of fighting it.
Proverbs says it begins with the fear of the Lord. Not dread. Awe.
And it ends in how you actually live.
Notice what is missing from that picture: fear.
Real wisdom starts in awe and is lived out in trust.
Hold on to that.
Real wisdom starts in awe and is lived out in trust.
There's one more piece, and it comes from Murphy.
He describes wisdom as a way of seeing things
bigger than we see them on our own.
I think he's right. Our human picture of God is woefully small.
Wisdom begins when we admit that. We own it.
And we keep seeking anyway, relentlessly,

knowing we cannot earn it with our own effort.

Wisdom isn't something we achieve. It's something we seek.
Now look at the story.

Ten bridesmaids. All ten were invited. All ten had lamps.
All ten went out to meet the bridegroom.
And here is the line we skip right over:
"As the bridegroom was delayed,
all of them became drowsy and slept."
All of them. Even the wise ones slept.
Jesus ends with,
"Keep awake therefore."
But nobody in the story stays awake.
Five wise women are snoring at midnight,
right next to five foolish ones.

If the point was "stay awake," every one of them failed.
So the point is not staying awake. Thank God.
I can barely stay awake once the sun goes down…
much less for the end of the age.
If you haven't been sleeping well this week…
if you've lain awake listening to the rain, hear this:
The wise ones slept too.
Jesus doesn't count your sleepless nights against you.
And he doesn't count your sleep against you either.
What counts is what you brought into the night.

Paul is just as gentle.

Our translation says "those who have died."
But the actual word Paul writes is "fallen asleep."
Sleep is not the problem in either text.
Sleep is what human beings do.
So what is the difference between the wise and the foolish?
Oil.
Five brought flasks of oil along with their lamps. Five did not.
When the shout comes at midnight…
the lamps of the foolish ones are going out.
Why did the wise ones bring extra oil?
Not because they were smarter. Not because they were sneakier.
Because they believed the bridegroom was coming.
If you truly expect him, you plan for a long night.

The foolish ones prepared for the wedding
they hoped would happen on their schedule.
The wise ones prepared for the wedding
God would hold fast on God's schedule.
That isn't street smarts.
That's taking a promise seriously.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount,
Jesus uses those same two words, wise and foolish,
about two builders. One built on rock. One built on sand.
And listen to how he defines the wise one:
"Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them."
Acts on them.

Right from the mouth of the Son of God…
Wisdom is not what you know.

It's what you do with what you know.

Both builders heard. The storm came to both. On a sunny afternoon, you couldn't have told the two houses apart.

This week the rain fell on everybody,

the careful and the careless alike.

Wisdom is not a way to avoid the flood…. It's how you stand in it. With oil in the flask... and with neighbors.

The Book of Wisdom gives that kind of living a face.

Hear it again:

"Wisdom is radiant and unfading,

and she is easily discerned by those who love her,

and is found by those who seek her."

…and what astonishes me… she isn't hiding.

She's not locked at the top of a mountain…

…where only monks and mystics can find 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."

Sitting at the gate.

Right there on the way to work.

"She goes about seeking those… worthy of her,

and she graciously appears to them in their paths,

and meets them in every thought."

Do you hear who is doing the seeking?

Wisdom is something we seek… relentlessly… That's true.
But look at what the reading says. She is seeking us.
She has been seeking us all along.
We were never searching in the dark for someone hiding.
We were being searched for,
by someone who got up early,
sat down at the gate,
and is walking the road toward us.
She started first.

I always thought I was doing the searching.
Imagine my surprise… she had been looking for me all along!
And more than I ever imagined.

Through finding that out… and answering it…
My faith has grown significantly.
I am still on this walk… same as you… We are walking it together.
And then the response… that brief passage we read in unison…
Desire leads to instruction
Instruction to love…
Love to keeping her ways…
Ultimately leading toward nearness to God
and to a Kingdom.

Look where it begins. Not with accomplishing anything. With desire.
If all you have in your flask this morning is wanting
If all you can honestly say… is that you want to want God
You're standing on the first step.
And Wisdom already rushed to meet you there.
Now, back to courage.
Why do I say wisdom without courage is not wisdom at all?

the Bible has a word… …for the person who knows the right thing… and doesn't do it.
The word isn't wise… it's foolish!

The builder who hears and does not act is a fool.
Courage is the hinge that turns what you know into what you do.

Think how much courage the wise bridesmaids needed.
They bought that extra oil on an ordinary afternoon…
in the quiet… no bridegroom in sight…
The neighbors thought they'd lost their minds.

We live in Florida. We know this.
You buy batteries and bottled water and plywood
on a clear blue Tuesday in May… Not a cloud in the sky.

It takes nerve to act on a storm you can't see... yet.
That nerve is courage. And it's what makes wisdom… wise.
Which brings me to the card in your hands.
Today, pledge cards are being distributed.
Picture what happens next. A couple sitting at the kitchen table.
The card is between them… The coffee is getting cold.
One says, "What about this number?"
And the other says, "Would that be wise?"
That's a good question. Maybe the best one.

But listen for which question it is.
If it means, "What is God doing in our life?

What do we want our life pointed toward?
What would this look like if we really believed God's promises?"

Then that's the oil conversation.
And Wisdom is sitting at the table with you.

But if "would that be wise?" means…
If we do this… Will we have enough to get through next year?"
then we've swapped the words.
That isn't wisdom. That's fear… wearing wisdom's coat.
And I say this with all the love in my heart.
If that's where the question comes from
It's missed the point entirely.

So, two things.

First, trust the Lord.
He provides.
Not always what we want.
What we need.

A widow in Zarephath is in a famine.
She has a handful of flour and a little oil in a jug,
enough for one last meal for herself… and her son.

The prophet Elijah tells her to feed him first.
And the jar of meal was not emptied, and the jug of oil did not fail.
Oil again. Notice the order.
The courage came first. The supply came after.
Second… fear of giving… is fear of scarcity.

Scarcity says there isn't enough.
So hold tight. Count everything. Keep it close.

Scarcity is the voice of the foolish bridesmaid at midnight:
Our lamps are going out.
And scarcity… has never grown a church, or a family, or a soul.

Our stewardship theme this year is "Plenty Good Room."
It comes from an old spiritual in the public domain, selected by The Episcopal Stewardship Network. We'll sing it next Sunday.
"Plenty Good Room." is the opposite of scarcity.
There is always room in God's house.
Room for more people… more ideas… more stories.
Room for you to pull up a chair.
Room for the neighbor you're going to invite.
The banquet in our parable has room for everyone who comes ready.

A pledge is a way of saying… out loud and ahead of time
"I believe it. I am acting on it."

It. Is. Not. A. Payment! And… It. Is. Not. a bid. for approval.
You already have God's approval. He made you.
A pledge is a witness to what God has already done in you.
Chasing anyone else's approval is a dead end.

God is not short. A pledge is a prayer in numbers.

Take the card home. Set it on the table.
Jennifer Douglas… our Assistant Treasurer
Will break down our financial obligations…
in dollars and cents

so you have clear picture of the What is needed in 2027.

So take your card home.
Don't fill it out in the pew with one eye on the clock.
Place it on your table. Pray over it. What should we do?
Ask Wisdom… sitting at the gate… happy to be asked.
Ask the courage question:
Is there a number… I would not have the nerve to write…
if I didn't believe God keeps promises?
Bring that card back on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, at the Ingathering,
where we gather to give thanks for all God's blessings.

Now for the hard part of this gospel reading.
The door is shut.
"Truly I tell you, I do not know you."
I won't pretend that's easy.
I preach a lot of funerals.
I truly believe… resurrection is a gift… to God's Children…
Nobody earns it by living a good life.
It is either all true or none of it is.
So how does that fit with a door slammed in your face?

First…
Jesus tells this story to his own disciples.
All ten are friends of the bride and groom.
This is a warning to insiders.
People who think being on the guest list…
…is the same as being in the room. IT IS NOT!

Second…
in the Bible… Knowing someone…

is not having information about them. It's friendship.

The foolish ones come knocking and saying,
"Lord, Lord, Open to Us," as if the words were a pass.
The trouble isn't… they were never invited.

The trouble is… when the party began… they were across town… shopping for something that can only be grown over time.

And if the wise ones seem stingy when they say no,
notice that what they have can't be passed over a fence at midnight.
Trust is not a thing you can lend.
I don't know where all the lines are.
What I do know… is the Bridegroom's character.
He is the one who left the ninety-nine to find the one.
He's the one who ran down the road to meet the prodigal.
If I'm going to be wrong about him, I'll be wrong on the side of mercy.

Which brings us back to Paul.
"Then we who are alive… who are left…
will be caught up in the clouds together with them
to meet the Lord in the air;
and so we will be with the Lord forever."

The Greek word for "meet" was a word for a particular scene.

When a king approached a city
the citizens poured out through the gates to meet him.
Then they walked him back in… in procession.
They didn't leave town. They escorted the king home.
Matthew uses the same word when the shout rings out at midnight: "Come out to meet him."
We don't abandon the world. We go out to meet the King…
and we bring him in.
And the ones who have died go first.
The dead in Christ will rise first.
Nobody is left behind.

At every funeral, before communion, I say the same thing:
They are not gone from this feast.
They are at the head of the table.
We knelt together at this altar rail.
Now we participate vertically.
They are already at the banquet, saving us a seat.

Paul is answering grief as much as timing.
So that you may not grieve as others do… who have no hope.
He doesn't say, Don't grieve. He says… grieve with hope.
Grief is what love costs.
And hope is what the Bridegroom gives back.
So here is my invitation for this week.

Find out what's in your flask.
Not a guilt inventory.
Just a look… the way you might check the hall closet before a storm.
What do you do on ordinary days that keeps you turned toward God?
A psalm in the morning? A phone call to someone who's lonely.

A prayer over a pledge card at the table.
And when you look in the flask
Will you find trust? …or fear?
Fear says hold on tight.
Wisdom says the Bridegroom's coming, bring enough for the night.
Courage says, Now Act like it.

The Bridegroom is delayed, not absent.
The lamps are lit. The door will open.
There is plenty good room at the table.
And we will be there, together, at the feast.
So let us pray the prayer we pray every Sunday
and mean it a little more than we did last week:
Jesus, help us to follow you in love, wisdom, and courage.
Amen.