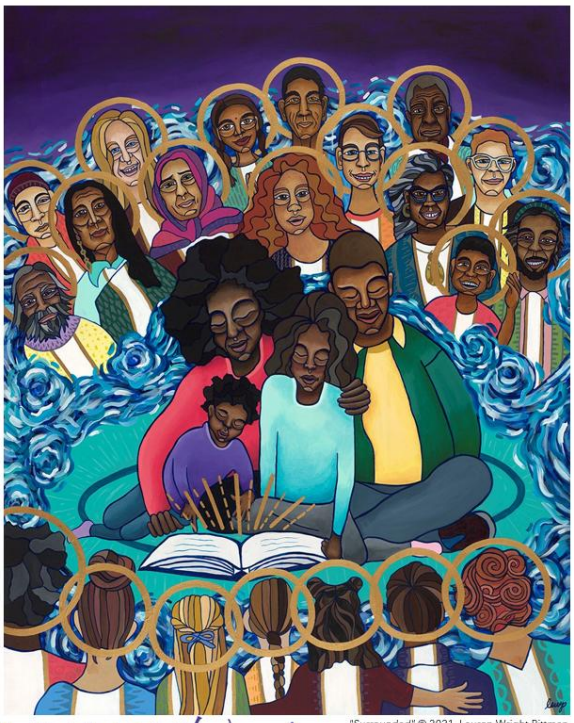


Heart Wisdom: Or Save the Baby

1 Kings 3:4-9. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. 5 At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I should give you." 6 And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you, and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. 7 And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. 9 Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?"

I Kings 3: 16-28. Later, two women who were prostitutes [sex workers] came to the king and stood before him. 17 The one woman said, "Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth while she was in the house. 18 Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house; only the two of us were in the house. 19 Then this woman's son died in the night because she lay on him. 20 She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast and laid her dead son at my breast. 21 When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead, but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne." 22 But the other woman said, "No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours." The first said, "No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine." So they argued before the king. 23 Then the king said, "The one says, 'This is my son who is alive, and your son is dead, 'while the other says, 'Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one. " '24 So the king said, "Bring me a sword," and they brought a sword before the king. 25 The king said, "Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one and half to the other." 26 But the woman whose son was alive said to the king, because compassion for her son burned within her, "Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!" The other said, "It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it." 27 Then the king responded, "Give her the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother." 28 All Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to execute justice.

Introduction: All Saints' Day. This is the time of year when we draw on our ancient Celtic heritage. For the nerds, it's religious syncretism time—that's when the merging of old religions gives way to something new. The Celts believed that *heaven is never more than three feet away.*[1] Just barely out of reach, all the time, almost here.

Our Celtic ancestors[2] also imparted their similar belief in certain physical locations where the dimensions that separate this /world from the next become permeable like cirrus clouds. They called *thin places*. This time of year, due to the tilt of the earth or slant of the autumn light—thin places become especially thin. That's the Celtic belief that gave way to All Saints Day, today, when the living listen and wait for the saints to draw near. On this All Saints' Day, we the living would do well to heed the psalmist call to savor each moment of this world. Hear the ancient words, from Psalm 90.[3]

[1] Sylvia Maddox, "Where Can I Touch the Edge of Heaven?" < http://www.explorefaith.org/mystery/mysteryThinPlaces.html >
[2] Graham Standish, "An essential Presbyterian conflict: Reformed versus Celtic faith" < https://pres-outlook.org/2013/02/an-essential-presbyterian-conflict-reformed-versus-celtic-faith/ >
[3] Selected verses, NRSVUE, alt.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You turn us back to dust and say, Turn back, you mortals."
For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past or like a watch in the night.
You sweep [us] away; [us] are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning [grass] flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.
Turn, O Lord! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
Satisfy us in [this] morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
Make us glad as many days as [we have been afflicted] and as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work be manifest to your servants and your glorious power to [our] children.
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper [and establish it], the work of our hands.[4]

Thin Places, High Places. Solomon climbs up to a thin place called Gibeon, which means *hill city—foreshadowing* the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." Up in that dark hill city, God appears in a dream to command Solomon: "Ask what shall I give you." Solomon replies by invoking the power of remembrance, what All Saints Day is all about." Lord, you showed my father David steadfast love…" Solomon, at least for now, demonstrates a humility that exceeds his father. *I am so young. I don't know how to lead, or even how to begin.* Solomon was in his late teens, maybe early twenties, when he was crowned king. A little older than, say, David Hogg, the same-ish age as Millie Bobbie Brown, or Juste Jocyte, or Baron Trump. What forms the young and influential?

Philosopher-Servant Leadership. In Book VII of *The Republic,* Plato described wise leaders. They don't crave power. They are reluctant to lead but rise to the occasion, lest someone worse comes along. They do not amass riches for themselves. They know the law applies to them, and they review the law every day. Author Jim Collins[5] echoes Plato when he writes that "servant leaders" don't live lavish lifestyles nor crave fame. They don't exploit all the perks. They demonstrate a profound obligation to protect their subordinates. Servant leaders are responsible for the well-being of other people. Leadership is about character.

Heart Wisdom. Solomon prays for an understanding mind, literally a listening "heart." The heart, or in Hebrew the *lev,* is the center of who you are. It's where your character lives, "where emotions stir, where choices are made, where faith begins—and [for Christians, it's] where Jesus[6] wants in."[7] [*pointing*] In here, in the *lev*, is a high place, a thin place of prayer and connection.

Down the mountain, in verse 16, Solomon encounters another thin place, a courtroom. Our sanctuary ministry can tell you about courtrooms, where asylum is granted, where arguments are weighed, or recently, where a judge identified his life with that of an undocumented Central American mother, sleep-deprived by a baby that cries all night, saying, "No need to explain, ma'am. I have seven children of my own. Tell me about sleepless nights!" Solomon presides over two such mothers. As women, they have no standing. They show him a baby, and fight for custody. Solomon calls for his sword to discern the heart (*lev*) of these women. One is full of compassion. The other says "Lop it in two." She had rather kill the baby than not get her way. Solomon's wisdom removes her mask, reveals her true character.

Application: Vote. This week, the sword is in your hands. *You* decide who might be wise enough to determine who to deny in our time, and who to believe. Which candidate promises to burn it all down, slice it in two, rather than lead with heart wisdom? Which candidates are servant leaders revere the rule of law? Which propositions and ballot measures keep the baby whole? Are you voting your Christian morals? I'm not talking about the outcome. I'm interested in your process, your discernment. Your vote is your sword. Wield it with wisdom. Solomon didn't use his sword for destruction; he used it as a teaching tool, a hand-prop to reveal the character of the people before him, vying for his favor..

Application: AI. We have others swords, too, such as artificial intelligence. It lives in your pocket, on a device about the size of a deck of cards, goes with you everywhere. The accelerationists[8] have already ceded the courtroom to it.

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[4] I tend to repeat the last lines of this hymn probably because of my love of Charles Ives' setting of *Psalm 90*. I studied it at a "formative age," and so it will always be with me. If the beginning is not your thing, begin listening around time mark 6:30. <https://youtu.be/1EB_9a-Bp-w?si=FCfLHA8klqiytO_H>
[5] Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (etc.)
[6] "Yeshua"
[7] Israel Pochtar, "Hebrew Word of the Week: Lev (לֵב):" <https://vojisrael.org/hebrew-word-of-the-week-lev-it-all-starts-in-the-heart>
[8] Learn this term "accelerationist" ! It is important. < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accelerationism>

AI already screens résumés, scores loan applications. Its algorithm chooses what each of us sees next. We ask it to divide things up quickly, without a flinch, and it makes us feel wise. I do not say these things to normalize AI, nor to recommend AI. I know that many of you use AI, work ins AI. When we use AI—and I say this to everyone here, self included—we are going too fast. We need to slow down, in some instances stop development altogether—until sustainable energy is available[9] to power data centers. We deserve to decide for ourselves, as a sovereign People, where the data centers will be built, if at all, and how fast, and how they draw on the "planet entrusted to our care."[10] The People are the only shareholders that matter. This Tuesday, take back the sword. Wrestle it from the takers. Hand it to the wisest servant leaders.

The last time I preached, we stood at Sinai, tablets in hand, and asked who gets to write the rules. AI prizes what its makers tell it to prize: growth, efficiency, engagement. When the people are caught unaware, or, misled by deceptive propositions, the takers tend to win. The values of a few builders will weigh more than the values God has been teaching us since Sinai.

And whatever else a machine is, it has no child in this mix. Nothing in it burns with a mother or father's compassion for their children. It doesn't drink clean water or know how compassion *feels*. The Hebrew word for the true mother's compassion shares a root with the word for *womb*. Womb, body wisdom, heart wisdom. Wisdom in this story is not just a clever argument. Wisdom is what cannot bear to divide the human child.

Giving Season. There's even an smidgeon of stewardship seasoned into this story. Remember how Jesus said where your treasure is, there your heart will be also? It's the same heart, the *lev,* your character. And yet, King Solomon's wisdom was fleeting. It won't be long until he couldn't help but become a taker: chariots, gold, silver, and forced labor to build it all. Allie Rosner Bass wonders whether his listening heart eventually forgets to keep listening. But do any of us remember to listen with our hearts, when we're asked to give? Every pledge card is God's question turned around. God said, "Ask what shall I give you?" Let's ask instead," What shall we give? How can we ever thank you, God, for all you've done for us?" Think of the saints of Calvary, 170-something years, generations who at answered before us, not only with casseroles, with concerts, but with long-range plans, high-minded capital campaigns, bequests, pledges, offerings, and giving extra when times got tough.

Live Into Your Sainthood. Our Reformed tradition teaches that no one shall stand between any of us and God. No one is too ordinary to be handed the sword of discernment. In fact, "saint" was never a term synonymous with the distinguished dead. When the apostle Paul wrote to living and quarrelsome congregations, he called them saints.[11] *Hagios*, holy. So the veil is thin not only because the dead draw near but because this world is holy ground, and these are holy times.

For you saints alive, the most realistic way I know to be in this world is to trust in the invisible, to believe in the things you don't fully understand. The foundational creed[12] of Nicea: *I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven in earth, and of all things visible and invisible*. And. *Therefore*, says Hebrews 12, *since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that distracts us, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.* It is a marathon not a sprint.

We are more than you appear to be. There is a cloud of witnesses just three feet away, and God's holy image[13] lives in you and every person you meet. So, hope isn't optimism; hope is paying attention to what is good, and holy, and alive. And should you doubt that such wonder is the ordinary condition of things, here are some statements I found online this week, and I verified the following information because, yes, it was suggested to me by the algorithm.

We live in a world where octopuses dream, where sea otters tuck a favorite rock into a pouch and use it day after day, where cows have best friends, and bees dance in regional dialects, where dolphins call to call each other by whistle-y names, where after the devastation of a wildfire, green ferns push up from the ashes, and weeds open into flowers.[14]

This is the world, and you are one of its saints, alive and serving God. Amen.

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[9] "Power Hungry Data Centers" < https://about.bnef.com/insights/clean-energy/power-hungry-data-centers-are-driving-green-energy-demand/>
[10] *A Brief Statment of Faith*, PC(USA)
[11] Romans 1:7, I Cor 1:2, 2 Cor 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1; 4:21, Colossians 1:2
[12] Nicene Creed < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed > In the PC(USA) we often refer to the creeds as "confessions" of faith.
[13] imago Dei < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image_of_God > foundational theology
[14] This is a list of wonders, shared widely on social media. Its original author seems to be unknown. Some of its original claims, while lovely, were unverifiable. So, this is my revised list which, I trust, is true. Whatever it is, it is worth remembering, every day. With God all things are possible.