The Prayer of Solomon

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Texts

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

10 Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David.

11 The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem.

12 So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

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3 Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.

4 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 your great people?"

10 It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

11 God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right,

12 I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.

13 I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you.

14 If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

Prayer

Sermon

We all play this game, in our minds: what would you wish for, if you were offered anything you wanted?

This is what God puts in front of Solomon.

I call this game the Magic Soda Bottle game. I don't play the lottery, and I have never won at poker – but I like to imagine what would happen if I opened a bottle of soda and found the instant winner twenty million dollar prize under the cap.

The odds have gotten longer since I stopped drinking sugary soda.

Nevertheless, after I set Zac up for college and pay off a mortgage and do something really substantial about climate change and perhaps pick some wonderful charity for a nice big chunk, oh what would we do then? What trip would we take? How many pairs of fabulous shoes would I buy? Would I single handedly bring my favorite TV show back from cancellation, perhaps? Would I retire to an island with an easel and watercolors?

Take a second. If the magic ticket came your way, what would you do? If the djinni came out of the bottle and gave you a wish, what would it be? What stuff would you get? What would you want?

Now Solomon was not just a faithful person, he was the new king. And God asked Solomon to make a wish. **"5** At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you.'"

We've had a summer of famous people saying what they would do and how they would be if they found themselves in the highest office of this land, but I'm not talking about any of them.

In this several thousand year old passage from the Bible, I suppose you could discover parallels. But as Rev. Dr. William Barber of the New Poor People's Campaign often says when he's preaching, *I'm just reading the Bible here.*

Solomon handled God's question, what do you want, in a manner so beautiful that we remember and reflect on it thousands of years later.

Solomon began his response with gratitude. He knew just how good he had it. He thanked God for steadfast love to David, his father (even when his father had messed up) and Solomon thanked God for the blessings of his own life, and for bringing him to the throne.

Then he asked for one thing.

“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”

Let me read the Bible again here,

“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”

And God was pleased.

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Kyle Brooks comments on this:

“Why did it please God that Solomon made this request? Perhaps it is a subtle acknowledgment that Solomon understands that the purpose of [royal] succession is not self-promotion but collective continuance. God’s ultimate intent, it seems, was not for kings over Israel but for the flourishing of the people in relationship with God (1 Samuel 8). In essence, Solomon’s request demonstrates that he does not hold a self-important view of kingship. Rather, he seeks the well-being of the people he stands not merely over but also amidst.: (https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-20-2/commentary-on-1-kings-210-12-33-14-6)

Solomon asked for wisdom, for the sake of being a worthy leader for God's people. He asked for something that would help the nation he was called to serve.

So God, pleased with this prayer, granted Solomon wisdom. And for thousands of years since, we have called Solomon Wise. This was the king, who just a few verses later, decides the case of the true mother. We could attribute to Solomon the principle that "Love makes a family." This was the man to whom is attributed three thousand Proverbs of wisdom.

But wisdom, once given, is not permanent. Hear these words of Proverbs 4: "Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. **6** Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you."

Solomon's wisdom seems shortlived when you consider:

He wound up a clear example of the dubious nature of Biblical marriage - one man and as many wives as his political alliances would allow (seven hundred, with three hundred concubines). He built a temple for God, yes - and a gigantic palace for himself, something to rival Lexington's largest homes. In the words of one scholar, "later in life, he begins to worship other gods (1 Kings 11:4-8), and he builds up his kingdom through forced labor and heavy taxes (1 Kings 11:28; 12:4). Because of Solomon's sins, the northern tribes rebel after his death and the kingdom is split in two." (Kathryn Schifferdecker,

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=363)

This distresses me. For thousands of years we have remembered wise Solomon for those early moments of selflessness and clarity. But the wisdom didn't stick.

I've been pondering wisdom. I'm getting ready for a series on the letter of James which is a New Testament Wisdom text. Wisdom, in the Bible, is an embodiment of God. An entity with a name - Shekinah in the Hebrew, Sophia in the Greek. Wisdom is part of the Divine Trinity, another word for Spirit. She breathed over the waters of creation. Wisdom as characterized in Proverbs is the woman who builds her house of seven pillars and prepares a feast for us and calls out to us. So I wonder what it is to truly, faithfully respond to her call. How do we use Wisdom for the greater good? How do we make it stick? How do we remember, and not forsake this gift, offered to us as generously as God offered it to Solomon?

Permit me, as one with a poor measure of wisdom, to put forth some ideas - perhaps we can build them together.

Wisdom is an ongoing process. Wisdom personified in scripture is eternal - with God from the beginning, "personifying God's own self in active engagement with the world." Paul even calls Jesus the wisdom of God. (Elizabeth Johnson, "Holy Wisdom: Image of God's Saving Presence" in *Living Pulpit*,

July-September 2000) And in Proverbs and elsewhere, we hear that we must continually work to renew wisdom.

Wisdom must be based in humility.

Wisdom is heart and hand knowledge (Wil Gafney, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1360) Wisdom that is not lived out is nothing. Wisdom that is not joined with compassion is nothing. If that's true, then some part of wisdom is being wise enough to show up. When we get to the letter of James, we'll see that wisdom is an ethic based in community, based in the common good of the whole community.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...," says Proverbs 9:10. Fear is not the best translation here, maybe awe would be better - you fear the Lord like you fear the ocean - standing alongside it in wonder and delight, but giving it due respect. (This idea is a paraphrase of the Working Preacher podcast.) Wisdom is not something we can gain on our own - there is a Wisdom, God's Wisdom, that should be our Guide.

And wisdom is grounded in listening, deep listening.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute understanding from people of ill will." (Letter from a Birmingham Jail)

I have a friend who is quiet. He listens. He sits on the edge of the circle. But when he speaks, he speaks from wisdom.

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I believe that wisdom is offered to us: if we listen; if we continually seek it; if we are humble; if we seek it for the common good. And we can use wisdom for the building up of God's reign of justice.

That sounds like a pretty amazing prize to me.

Wisdom calls out to us, over and over. May we, again and again, listen - and accept her invitation.

Amen.