

“Wisdom”

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

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Carbondale Community United Methodist Church

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The king is dead. David, the one whom God always loves, has gone to be with his ancestors—as Israelites understood the afterlife. We bid ‘adieu’ to the man whose life story was filled with grand triumph and with great tragedy. Before he died, David swore to his wife Bathsheba saying, “Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne in my place.” The king had the priest Zadok and prophet Nathan anoint him and declare Solomon as king. David died trusting that his crown would peacefully pass to his now anointed son.

Yet, Israel wasn’t well practiced in dynastic succession. Saul and David were their first two kings—and they weren’t related by blood. David offers his son some advice in order to help him solidify the Davidic dynasty into place. Solomon was told by his dad to “not let Joab’s gray head go down to Sheol in peace” and to bring “Shimei’s grey head down with blood.” (1Kings 2: 6, 9) David basically tells his son to murder in order to consolidate Solomon’s new reign with legitimacy. Solomon appears only too happy to comply. In short order, Solomon’s commander Benaiah kills Joab, and then eventually Shimei when Shimei disobeys his house arrest order. When his elder half-brother Adonijah—who had previously tried to stage a royal coup to take power (I Kings 1)—asks through Bathsheba for his father’s concubine Abishag, Solomon became incensed. His half-brother was making another overt move for the throne. Solomon had Benaiah kill him. The scripture says, “so the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon.” (1 Kings 2: 46)

When Solomon goes to Gibeon, a sacred place for Israel, perhaps his conscience is a little heavy with three murders. Solomon may be relatively new to the kingship, but he isn't a fresh innocent. Worn out with trying to establish his reign, he decides to take a nap.

Here's where it gets really interesting. God appears to him while he is sleeping. For Solomon, this is fantastic. In the culture of the ancient near east, dreams in which the divine appeared provided legitimation for the ruler. For example, for the crown prince of Egypt, Tuth-mose IV(1421-1413 BC), who reigned over 400 years before Solomon, a dream offered him the divine promise of kingship. For Solomon, this divine appearance confirms Solomon's favored position over any of David's other children/rivals, and affirms that he is king of all Israel. The dream gives Solomon a divine affirmation, which he sorely needed.

It just gets better for Solomon. God asks Solomon what God can give him. Such a request was often part of the ancient near East royal coronation ritual—the king is given the privilege of a special petition to the deity. Solomon knows that the dream, combined with God's offer to give him something, solidifies his place on the throne. He stalls a little while—for about three verses worth of verbiage. While he's blabbing about God's faithfulness to David and his own youth in accepting a crown over so many people, Solomon's head is spinning. What should he ask for? What is the right request to make of God?

Solomon would have been steeped in the wisdom tradition of his culture. Though the wisdom books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes wouldn't be written down for centuries more, their oral tradition would have been circulating in the stories the Hebrew people told. In the different clans of Israel, parents told proverbs, parables, riddles, and sayings to their

children.¹ Even more, Israel most likely had a professional class of sages—upper class learned people who desired to present truth in beautiful form for the instruction of generations of Israelites.² Solomon might have learned from these wise scholars that wisdom was to be elevated above longevity, honor, and wealth. He certainly would have been affected by Egyptian wisdom literature like the Instruction of Amenemope, as well as Mesopotamian wisdom literature.³ Solomon would have known well the Hebrew word for wisdom- *khokmah*- and he would have known that it meant the ability to choose good from evil, to listen well, to judge rightly. He would have known that wisdom only comes as a gift from God, and is a very valuable gift indeed.

So as he blabbed on about his dad’s faithfulness and God making him a servant king, Solomon was remembering all that he knew about all the benefits his culture taught him that wisdom would confer. All the stories of his mother, the bits of wisdom sayings that would eventually become the Proverbs fill his mind. No surprise then, that he replies to God, “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” A better translation of *khokmah*—of an “understanding mind” is a “wise heart.” Solomon is asking God to give him the ability to listen with the heart as he rules.

God is pleased with such a wise request, and grants him the ability to hear truth with his heart. To prove this, in the next verses Solomon adjudicates between two women fighting over a baby boy. He proposes to have the child cut in two—but the true mother, wanting to spare her child’s life at any cost—begs him not to do so, but to give him to the

¹ James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1981), 56, 32.

² Ibid, 28-34.

³ Ibid.

other woman if that will save the boy's life. Solomon gives the child back to the rightful mother, showing his powers of wisdom and of hearing with the heart.

These powers; however, are only given by God. God came to Solomon with an open invitation. God graciously bestowed upon Solomon the gift of discernment. Solomon didn't earn it, or have innate qualities. Rather wisdom, in difference to acquired knowledge, comes as gift. Solomon received the gift not because he deserved it, but because God was gracious. Solomon's wisdom, which made him a legendary and effective ruler, is not due to his own righteousness.

In fact, Solomon was very, very human—he isn't wise because he's without blemish. Notwithstanding the few murders, Solomon will conscript thousands into slave labor (just as prophet Samuel predicted about kings) He will have 700 wives and 300 concubines who turn away his heart from God (not very wise either!). He will be selfish, negligent, and unjust. Though his attitude of humility in asking for wisdom is admirable, he's not someone we want to emulate. Yet, God responds to Solomon's imperfect love with perfect love and undeserved blessings.

So too will God respond to us. Most of us are very, very human, with our own foibles and character challenges. Like Solomon, we have ambivalence within us where sometimes we choose the good---but sometimes we don't. We all need the gift of wisdom to know how to choose good from evil, how to listen well, how to judge rightly. The Hebrew Bible, or OT, teaches that wisdom comes not just to kings like Solomon, but to all who would seek it. God grants to all of us who would ask the gift of wisdom, not because we've earned it or are innately smart, but because God is gracious to us. Wisdom comes, not because we've studied or have academic degrees or have great work experience. Wisdom comes because we spend time with the One who grants it to us.

How many of you know someone who is truly wise? I spend time each month with my spiritual director. She is a wise one. She guides me in prayer, she listens to my spiritual journey, and she offers wise counsel. As I sit with her, I feel that I'm imbibing wisdom from her deep experience of living with God. She sits every day for hours in prayer with God, and it is that deep soaking in the incomparable love of God that gives her true wisdom. I get to soak in that love when I'm with her---and am encouraged to deepen my own time with God when I leave. She helps me to learn better how to listen with the heart.

I wonder how many of you might be in need of wisdom. Are you facing a choice you need to make or something new in your life? Are you needing to judge rightly between your children, between family members, between friends? Then turn to God with the heart of a child—with hearts as open as the children at Vacation Bible School. Listen with your heart and God will grant you the wisdom to know what to do.

A story is told of a wise saying of the early church Abba, or Father Nisterus. A brother was struggling with what he should do with his life for the good; he wasn't sure of his vocation. He asked "What good work should I do that I may live?" The Father, Abba Nisterus said to him "Are not all actions equal? Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. David was humble, and God was with him. Elijah loved interior peace and God was with him. So do whatever you see your soul desires according to God and guard your heart."⁴ The Abba was telling him that each person has their own gifts, their own way to serve in the world, and he must listen to God with his heart in order to know how he is to serve.

The prime book of wisdom, Proverbs, in chapter 2 says, "my child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom

⁴ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1987), 85 quoting Apoth., Nisterus 2, 154).

and inclining your heart to understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as hidden treasures—you will understand the awe of the Lord. For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; wisdom will come into your heart and will be pleasant to your soul.” May we listen with our hearts, so that God will give us the wisdom that we seek in our lives. In the name of God, Amen.