

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

August 19, 2018  
*20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

### **The First Wise Thing**

“We’ve been hearing a lot about the bad people in the Bible this summer,” cracked an elder at a meeting earlier this week. The laughter in the room confirmed that impression. After all, we started the summer with the prophet Samuel warning the people about the dangers of having a king. Give a person too much power, and they’ll take advantage of it. Stories of the kings of Israel bear out that prophecy. Two weeks of the David and Bathsheba story brought it home for us this summer.

So it’s a relief today to hear the story of young King Solomon’s piety, and his request for wisdom to lead his people. It’s a classic story, told to generation after generation, a story which finds its way into literature and leadership manuals and certainly into Sunday school curricula. The new king had an opportunity to ask God for anything. What would he choose? A long life and unchallenged reign on the throne? Riches? Military success? Popularity? No, he chooses the gift of an understanding mind, the ability to discern good from evil. It’s a wise choice, affirmed by God and by those who wrote the history.

And so it was that the king’s reputation spread around the known world, bringing honor and respect for his small nation and people. Because of his wisdom, he was able to make strategic military and political alliances. Because of his wisdom, he could build beautiful palaces and a wonderful temple for God. Because of his wisdom, he was blessed with long life and riches and a peaceable reign of 40 years. It was the right choice, that first wise thing Solomon did as king. If only all rulers would choose the same.

I remember the first time I tried to read the Bible cover to cover. I was in college. To be honest, I may have skipped some portions of Leviticus. But I distinctly remember getting a little bit farther than we are today in Solomon’s story, to chapter 11 of 1 Kings, and being shocked. I turned to my roommate and said, “Did you know that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines?”

It was part of the story I hadn’t heard in Sunday school. But it’s there in the Bible. The lectionary skips over some other shocking stories, too. In order to become king, Solomon plotted against his eldest living brother, the rightful heir, and had him killed, along with several others who might have denied Solomon the throne. His building projects required forced labor—slavery—and excessive taxes, which also supported his lavish lifestyle. His sexual lust was matched by his religious promiscuity, which led his people into all sorts of idolatry, including child sacrifice. At the end of his reign, the unrest which had been brewing erupted in civil war and the division of the kingdom. Which leads to the question—was Solomon really wise?

I suppose that’s the danger of actually reading the Bible. There’s a lot more in there than you’d ever expect. Sometimes Christians want to excise those offensive portions, cut them out. We think the Bible should only tell us about exemplary people, those whose lives provide a moral and ethical standard to live up to. Like Jesus, for instance. We want to clean it up, turn it into a book of beauty and grace and spiritual uplifting throughout.

I fear that when we do that, we risk making it irrelevant. Learn about the reality of human relationships, the whole Bible tells us. Learn about the myriad ways humans fall into idolatry. Learn about the depths of human depravity, so that you can turn toward the only One who can save us, the

One who made us in love and desires our reunion, the One who lives among us giving us the grace of hope and goodness and peace.

The Bible is a much more honest book than we sometimes admit. It tells us that Solomon was wise when he asked for wisdom, and foolish when he ignored God's warnings against greed, and lust, and worshiping other gods. Solomon was a mix of motives and desires, of good and evil, of strength and weakness. The writers who told his stories saw this mix, added their editorial comments, and gave us a text to provoke our deepest explorations into life in the world and life under God.

It is honesty about this mix that keeps us interested, because we too are a mix. If you've listened to or been lucky enough to see the hit Broadway musical *Hamilton*, you will recognize the same kind of interesting honesty about our nation's founding fathers. Only George Washington comes across as consistently honorable in this telling of the story, and even he admits to young Alexander Hamilton that he made foolish leadership mistakes when he was young.

Solomon was young when he wisely asked for the gift of wisdom. He was humble at the time, calling himself a "little child" though he was probably a man of 20 years or so. We think of wisdom as something acquired through age and experience. Yet we all know those who are "wise beyond their years," and those who remain foolish all their lives.

According to tradition, Solomon wrote a large portion of what we know as the book of Proverbs, a collection of sayings and instructions with a recurrent theme, echoed in today's psalm: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The first wise thing for any of us is humility before God. The first wise thing is to admit our weakness, our smallness, and our need for the greatness of God in our lives. The first wise thing is to be hungry for wisdom, open to learning and accepting the gift of understanding and discernment which comes from God.

And the second wise thing is to remain committed to the wisdom God gives. For wisdom is a way, a journey, not a quick answer to one of life's riddles. Solomon demonstrated his wisdom when two women came to him with one infant, each claiming the infant as her own. Both had given birth, and one baby had died. Who was the true mother of this living child? Each woman insisted it was she. "Bring a sword," said Solomon, "and we'll divide the boy in two." This pronouncement caused one of the women to relent, "No, do not kill him, she may have him!" And since she was willing to put the child's life ahead of her own interests, Solomon pronounced her the true mother of the child.

Very clever. A gift of leadership one would not expect in a 20-year-old king. A promising act of judgment early in his reign. But would these seeds of wisdom continue to grow?

Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann critiques Solomon's leadership path. "The wisdom that Solomon does not learn is attentiveness to those for whom God has special attentiveness. There are all kinds of dreams—of power and money and prestige and control. But the dream of justice for widows, orphans, and immigrants is the deep wisdom of Torah obedience." (quoted by Debi Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1880>)

No, the Hebrew Bible shows us, there is no human king who completely fulfills God's dream. There is no human leader who satisfies the people's longing for a just and merciful society, the vision God plants in us of God's desire for us. The only one who can save us is the one and only God, who wants to be king of our hearts and minds and souls not for the sake of power and glory, but for our sake, our good, our love.

So it was that into this world of good intentions and poor execution, of mixed motives and deep yearnings, of agonizing need and divine promise, came Jesus. He learned wisdom, for the gospel of Luke tells us, “he increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” (Lk 2:52) He became a teacher of wisdom, a sage, one who taught not a body of information but a path, what New Testament scholar Marcus Borg calls a “way of transformation. . . from life in the world of conventional wisdom to a life centered in God.” (*The Living Pulpit*, vol 9, no. 3, p. 7) His wisdom was—and still is—challenging. Good news for the poor, release for captives, sight for the blind, relief for the oppressed. Repentance for sin, forgiveness of those who have wronged us, loving one another, loving our neighbor, loving our enemies. And, seeking first the kingdom—or the kindom—of God.

After his death and resurrection, the apostle Paul named what others sensed. He wrote that Jesus, the Christ, not only taught wisdom, but was and is the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), Wisdom who dwelled among us. Our desire for wisdom, the desire Solomon voiced and God affirmed, is our desire to know Christ, God with us. On his path, we learn to see him more clearly, love him more dearly, follow him more nearly. (See Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., “Jesus, the Wisdom of God,” in *The Living Pulpit*, vol 9, no 3, pp. 4-5) On his path, we learn to be always aware that we are in the presence of a holy, just, and almighty God—the awareness the Bible calls “the fear of the Lord.” And on his path, we begin to live God’s dream for the world.

So in the light of Christ, let’s tell Solomon’s story once more.

Once upon a time there lived a king. He had big dreams, as most of us do. He had great faults, as most of us do. He yearned at times for the best of things—wisdom, discernment, and a sound mind—and lusted at other times for the worst. He lived a life marked by success and failure, nobility and disgrace. He loved God and he didn’t. He pleased God and he didn’t. He left a legacy that was neither perfect nor wretched, as most of us will. But he was loved by God throughout—even when his foolish wisdom shattered God’s heart.

(Debi Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1880>)

And so are we, fools that we may be.

God has planted in us the longing for wisdom, and is eager to give us his eternal Wisdom, Jesus Christ. Just ask for it. And have the audacity to ask for one more thing—the ability to stick to it. By God’s grace, we’ll get there.