

“An Understanding Heart”

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Change happens. How we handle or navigate change matters for the quality of our lives and others near us. The reading from 1 Kings narrates a time of transition in life of Israel, a transferring of power between two administrations, from one leader to another...

Then David slept with his ancestors and was buried in the city of David. The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his kingdom was firmly established.

After five weeks of the story of David in the Old Testament this summer we turn to his son and successor, Solomon. After five weeks of David’s questionable antics and behaviors in the lectionary selections, we get two weeks of prayers—David’s prayer of repentance and this week Solomon’s prayer for wisdom. We move from the one called “a man after God’s heart”—David. David had a repentant heart. He pours his heart out to the Lord God:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.” (Psalm 51:1-3, NRSV)

And now we move from the David to Solomon who prayed for and was given an “understanding heart or mind”:

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. 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. 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?”

Solomon was the wisest man in the world. He wrote that wisdom is worth more than fine jewels ([Proverbs 3:15](#)) and much more than gold ([Proverbs 16:16](#)). Along with careful planning, it is a bringer of a long life filled with honor ([Proverbs 3:22](#)).

As the wisest man in the world during his lifetime, even kings and queens would travel from near and far to ask him questions. There is the famous story that follows right after this passage where two women brought a newborn to the King each claiming to be the true mother. They argued before Solomon. “The king said, “Divide the living boy in two; then give half to the one, and half to the other.”” 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!”

Indeed, the biblical record of Solomon is full of stories demonstrating his acts of wisdom. He is credited as the author of the number of the wisdom books that are in the Hebrew Bible—The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.

In this time of transition we know that David was a work in progress is undeniable; even late in his life, he was struggling with character flaws that constantly got in his way. Now we have Solomon, and surely, he has learned from the weaknesses of his father. But he too is flawed. He too hedges his bets. He sacrifices to strange and foreign gods.

Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David, **except** that he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. 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.

It is at Gibeon where the Lord appears to Solomon. It is interesting that Solomon should seek to worship at the high places or the particular one in Gibeon, for the Ark of the Covenant, the very symbol of the Lord's presence, was in Jerusalem. It was those who worshipped violent and strange gods who went to the high places. Sometimes even the wise can act foolishly.

Lesson #1: We are all flawed and broken human beings in one way or another.

So Solomon went to Gibeon to worship, even though the Ark of the Covenant was in Jerusalem. Solomon cannot be easily excused for having gone to that great high place.

In spite of this, God shows up for Solomon and God makes one of those “chance of a lifetime” offers. “Ask what I should give you” (1 Kings 3:5). Was this a test?

If Solomon had asked for something trivial, or something selfish or destructive, would God have said, “Sorry, no”? Or was it one of those things where the omniscient God knew what Solomon would ask for, so there wasn’t really a risk in making the offer? We can’t really know, but if Solomon wasn’t really free to be selfish and greedy, then what’s the risk? And why does God seem surprised and pleased with how Solomon did respond to the offer?

“Wisdom,” Solomon asks. “Give me wisdom so that I can make the right choices so that I can lead with confidence and power.” Or was it rather an anxious act born of his awareness of the failings of his beloved father and his twisted history and the fears that he wasn’t up to the task?

God says, “Because you asked for yourself this thing, but you did not ask for yourself longevity, you did not ask for yourself wealth, you did not ask for yourself the life of your enemies, but you ask for yourself discernment to hear what is just.”

Rather than desiring for the more selfish and worldly desires of longevity, riches, honor, and victory over enemies, Solomon’s dream prayer to the Lord indicates the depth of his character. Here he is a model of faith that seeks first the good of God’s kingdom, the just and proper rule of God’s people, rather than one’s private interests, and because of that righteous attitude, Solomon is richly blessed. I want to observe that this was not always the case for him.

I would like to point out that each of us have our own special moments before God. God is always seeking us out even in the high places where we shouldn't be. **This is Lesson #2: We may not have a fantastical dream vision like Solomon did, but there are moments in our lives when God says, "Ask what is it that you desire from me?"**

The account of Solomon's experience at Gibeon teaches us that his wisdom was not something that he acquired through his own efforts. Nor was it an innate quality he was born with. Rather, wisdom was given by God. All the other benefits, too, were not merely the derivatives of wisdom, but there was only one condition—obedience to God's way (v. 14).

Then Solomon awoke from his dream vision and returned to Jerusalem. Where he had been worshiping at the high places where he should not have been and had gone to Gibeon to worship, he returned in the end to Jerusalem, where the ark was (v. 15).

It was God who came to Solomon first despite the fact that the king had endangered the integrity of the kingdom by bringing it into alliance with Egypt. Solomon, too, was slow to build the Temple and the defenses of the city, because he was more interested in his own marriage to the Egyptian princess and in building his own palace. He worshiped at the high places, which faithful reformers like Josiah later on had to eliminate. Yet, God came to him with an open invitation. God took the initiative.

Solomon loved God but only in a qualified way. Nevertheless, God blessed him. Such is the nature of God in Scripture. In the light of this, **This is Lesson #3 for us—God responds to the imperfect love (3:4), even our imperfect love, the sincere if inadequate response of mortals, with undeserved blessings, only to summon us yet again to love and to obey (3:14).**

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