

“An Understanding Mind”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 30, 2022

Reformation Sunday

Psalm 111

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

1 Kings 3:3-15

“Ask what I should give you.” These are the words that Solomon, the wealthiest, wisest and last king of the unified kingdom of Israel hears God ask him in a dream. In a scene that is something like the genie emerging from a bottle, Solomon is given the chance to have his wish granted by God. What, as a young monarch ascending to the throne, as the ruler of his people, would Solomon most want God to grant him?

This is not the first or last time in the scriptures that God appears in a dream. We remember Jacob wrestling in the night with an angel, emerging in the morning having been granted his new name: Israel. We also think of Joseph, the dreamer, who would be visited with visions that led him to rise to a position of authority in Egypt, allowing him to offer salvation to his family in the face of famine. In the gospels, we find stories of angels visiting Mary and her Joseph in dreams, telling them they would bring into the world God’s Son, Jesus.

But, we also might think of God’s encounter with Solomon as something of a test: will he ask for the right thing? Will he choose riches and power, a life of conquest or leisure? The entire history of the Israeli monarchy is portrayed in scripture with ambivalence: reveling in its successes while wary of its too often unchecked power. This so-called Deuteronomic hand – the editors who put the books of Joshua and Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings into their final form – was composed during the exile, after the monarchy had fallen and Jerusalem destroyed. This ambivalence runs through all of Solomon’s reign, praising the king’s wisdom, wealth, and work, yet lamenting the faithlessness of his worship of the foreign gods of his many wives.¹

Over the past number of weeks, we have witnessed – from across the pond – the deep feelings of ambivalence that many of the people of Great Britain have for

¹ Cameron Howard from *WorkingPreacher.com*

their monarchy as the long-reigning and much-beloved Queen died and her son, Charles, ascended to the throne. We now witness, also, the political complications that exist alongside their mostly ceremonial monarchy.

Our nation, of course, chose long ago not to be ruled by monarchs, but much of the same ambivalence about our political leaders – local, state, and national – can be seen here, as well. It may serve us well to ask what we look for in our civic leaders; what would they ask for if God gave them the chance? Is it power or job security? Or would they ask for wisdom, for the ability to govern well and judge between good and evil?

Solomon is at the crucial beginnings of his reign when God poses this generous question. If you were in charge of a kingdom, what would you ask for? What would your priorities be? Protection of culture? Possession of other lands? Accumulating riches and status? Such things are driven by fear and greed. Solomon – at this point – is not driven by these desires.

Solomon instead asks for understanding mind, for wisdom. This could alternately be translated as a listening heart. Solomon seems to know what he doesn't know; that, as a young ruler, he will need, in order to best rule the people, to be able to discern good from evil.

If God's question is indeed a test, Solomon passes with flying colors. God is so pleased that Solomon has asked for a discerning mind, for a listening heart – instead of money, conquest, or long life – that God grants the king's request with some bonuses to help him along the way. Solomon will receive unparalleled wisdom as well as unprecedented riches and honor. It makes us wonder whether God may have given this young ruler too much, too soon. When riches and power are granted, sometimes good judgment can get lost. Maybe it is for this very reason that Solomon's reign – despite its many successes – will not end well.

But that should not cloud our appreciation for the way Solomon answers God here; and the importance of an understanding mind and listening heart. This is true not only for kings, but for each of us; not only in the civic arena, but in our individual and collective lives as well.

On this Reformation Sunday – when those of us in the Protestant tradition remember the reasons for and outgrowths of the church from the Reformation which began five centuries ago – it is fitting to consider this idea of a discerning mind and listening heart. We believe that those reformers were not only protesting what they saw and experienced in the church, they were also proposing new

priorities for their day. Protestant churches were shaped by their emphasis on the priesthood of all believers – the idea that leadership should be shared among the people – and the encouragement for all people to read scripture and develop a personal relationship with God.

These principles of the Reformed tradition were codified into statements called creeds; many of the creeds in our denomination’s Book of Confessions – like the Westminster and Scots Confessions – were composed during this Reformation era. But we also believe that God continues to speak in new ways, calling us to be reformed and ever-reforming. Thus, we have continued to adopt new confessions; the latest of which, the Confession of Belhar, was added in 2016. As you can see in the flyer attached to this morning’s bulletin, Belhar was written as a statement of the church in South Africa opposing participation in the system of apartheid. Thus, it adds to our Book of Confessions a new voice to witness to justice for all people.

In the Deuteronomic tradition of the Old Testament, justice plays a paramount role. It was the responsibility of leaders to defend the vulnerable who could not defend themselves: the alien, the widow, and the orphan. Immediately following this morning’s text, we find the most famous example of Solomon’s wisdom and protection for the vulnerable. Two women approach him, each of them has recently given birth to a child, but one has tragically died in its sleep. The two women are each claiming that the remaining child is their own. As scary as some artistic depictions of this story are, with an infant child about to be sliced in two, Solomon uses the tools of wisdom – a discerning mind, a listening heart, and an understanding of the human condition – to reach a judgment that values the plight of the most vulnerable in society and puts the interests of the child first.²

At that story’s conclusion, we are told that, “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.” (I Kings 3:28)

Still, as much as King Solomon receives this praise, his reign provides a good reminder that leaders in the biblical tradition, as in life, more often than not are driven by a mix of complex motives. It is wise not to romanticize political power, seeing that any leader has the potential to corrupt or abuse that power. Solomon’s statement to God, “I do not know how to go out or come in” was typically used in a military context to denote the king’s participation in war. This reference serves as a sobering reminder that it is ever within the power of rulers to

² Casey Thornburg Sigmon from *WorkingPreacher.com*

destroy innocent lives. In subsequent chapters, King Solomon will be remembered as the one who built the temple for God. This act of piety is accompanied by the reality that forced labor is used for all the building projects of the king; again showing how innocent people can be harmed in the strivings of political leaders for greatness.

All people – not only political leaders – have the potential to do good, but also do harm. Solomon’s request for an understanding mind and listening heart may encourage people to do what is right – as in the case of the two women who come before the king – to listen to the voice of the vulnerable, to do what one can to preserve life.

But it is important to remember that *it is God* who approaches Solomon in his dream. *It is God* who desires to grant him with the tools he requires to govern well, regardless of his faults and frailties as a human being. God’s initiative here shows us that God’s grace can break into the midst of the everyday realities of life that are rarely straightforward or uncomplicated.

As a sign of God’s granting him an understanding mind and listening heart, we last see King Solomon awaking from his dream, going to Jerusalem to offer worship to God before the Ark of the Covenant, in the place where the temple will soon be built. Solomon’s first thought, his initial reaction after speaking with God, was to go and offer thanks: the response to an invitation from God and an affirmation of how close his relationship with God had grown.³

May our lives, also, grow ever closer to God as we seek to act in the world in wisdom, with an understanding mind and listening heart. In the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, the composer of our first hymn’s lyrics, “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour...for the living of these days...lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal...serving thee whom we adore.” Amen.

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*