

Lectionary 17 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 26, 2020

1 Kings 3:5-12; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

When I was a kid, I knew one thing about King Solomon. Two women were arguing over the custody of a baby boy. King Solomon offered to split the child in two with his sword. The true mother volunteered to relinquish her claim, so that the boy could live. The lying woman said, sure, go ahead and cut the baby in half. And so King Solomon was able to distinguish the true mother, and restore her son to her, which was proof of Solomon's wisdom. That's what I knew about Solomon when I was a kid. A kind of a frightening and morbid story, but it had a happy ending. King Solomon was wise. That's one of about ten things I knew about the Bible when I was a child.

That famous story— have you ever heard it or read it? — that famous story *follows* today's first reading. In which Solomon requests wisdom from God, and God grants it. This takes place in a dream. Solomon wakes up and returns to Jerusalem. And he soon find himself the arbitrator between the two women. And that vignette, that little story, concludes with this observation by the narrator: *All Israel heard of the judgement 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.* So the story of the two women arguing about the baby boy— which is *not* in the three-year lectionary, so it is not ever appointed for preaching— that story is the demonstration, the proof, that God followed through on what he promised in today's first reading.

Now, part of what makes today's first lesson so compelling is that God says to Solomon, "*Ask what I should give you.*" If God offered to grant you a wish, what would *you* ask for? And is this a trick? When Aladdin offers three wishes or when a fairy godmother offers to grant a wish sometimes the outcome can be disastrous. Often the wish becomes an ironic punishment. Coincidentally, the rise of King Solomon is God's answer to a request made by the Israelites. Way back at the beginning of Samuel [I Samuel 8] the people ask for a king so that they can be like other nations. They want a king to fight battles for them. God sees himself as their king, but they don't think so. They want a conventional ruler. And so before God grants their wish, Samuel gives them a lecture on what a king will do. A king will tax and conscript and confiscate. A king will take away your liberty. A king will take your property. A king will put your sons in his army. Samuel warns the people, but they insist on a king anyway. God gives them a monarch— first Saul, then David, now David's son Solomon. And it will be Solomon who seizes and conscripts forced labor, who taxes everything, who puts women in his harems and men in his armies. It's Solomon's exploitation of the machinery of the state that will make him

so rich and powerful, and will sow the seeds of the permanent rupture of the kingdom into northern and southern rivals. So Solomon himself is an example of “Be careful what you ask for. You just may get it.”

But in this particular story, when Solomon could ask for anything, he does not ask for health and longevity, which is what many of us would ask for. Or for riches. Or for the defeat of his enemies. He asks for “an understanding mind” and the ability to discern between good and evil. In the verses which follow our reading, God declares that he will give Solomon riches, nevertheless, despite the fact that Solomon did not ask. Because God is pleased that Solomon requested understanding and discernment. So there you have it. God offered to grant Solomon a wish, and Solomon asked for wisdom. It took wisdom to ask for wisdom. But Solomon asked and received. And his story, as the book of Kings continues, reveals that Solomon became internationally recognized for his wisdom. [I Kings 4:29-34] Two books of the Bible, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, are said to be residuals of his wisdom, along with an apocryphal book called the “Wisdom of Solomon,” which was actually written many centuries later.

The Bible takes a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward Solomon. Yes, he was wise, but he was not as faithful to God as his father David had been. [I Kings 11:1-13] Yes, he was successful, but he was harsh. So there are good things about Solomon, and bad things. That’s true of everybody in the Bible, including Moses and David in the Old Testament, and Peter and Paul in the New Testament. But Solomon’s guilt involved false gods, the breaking of the first of the Ten Commandments. It’s hard to imagine how he could have done that, given that the living God was already so good to him. The Bible suggests that in his old age, some of his many wives led him astray. Whatever caused his apostasy—his turn away from God—the Bible gives him mixed reviews.

Similarly, the Bible as a whole gives a mixed perspective on wisdom. The kind of wisdom Solomon had, including the ability to know right from wrong, did not prevent him from honoring other gods. Wisdom does not equal faithfulness. The book of Job is included in the Bible along with Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. Job is the anti-wisdom wisdom. Traditional wisdom implies that good decisions will be rewarded, and bad decisions will be punished. Traditional wisdom is about consequences, and our own responsibility for reaping our own consequences. The book of Job is not like that. Good behavior does not lead to rewards, and bad behavior does not lead to punishments, and there are no obvious answers to some of life’s greatest problems. This is the perspective of Job. Which makes it an outlier among the books of the Bible. But it is nevertheless a venerable and always unquestioned part of the Bible.

I suspect that our first reading was selected to accompany our gospel because in the gospel, Jesus tells parables of the kingdom of God in which a small thing or a hidden thing is found and is recognized and becomes the foundation for something new. Whether it’s a tiny mustard seed, hidden treasure in a field, a rare pearl, or yeast, the emphasis is on the power of things that others overlook. Tiny things that make a difference. Wisdom in the kingdom of God is the wisdom to seek and find the treasures in the world that others overlook.

In the New Testament, wisdom is found in unexpected places. The most famous explanation of wisdom in the New Testament comes from the Apostle Paul: *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...* [1 Cor. 1:20-23] Christ crucified is wisdom.

Our reading about Solomon today by happy coincidence is laid alongside of something that Paul writes about the Holy Spirit. *The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.* We do not know how to pray. I think that's so profound. If anyone ever knew how to pray, surely it would be the Apostle Paul. But he says we do not know how to pray. We can't find the answers because we don't even know how to ask the questions. The Spirit intercedes for us. The Spirit can be our wisdom. Solomon prayed for understanding and for the ability to discern. For Christians, the Holy Spirit gives us understanding [John 16:13] and the ability to discern [1 Cor. 12:10]



On the cover of your service folder is a medieval manuscript illumination depicting Solomon praying to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is shown as a dove, which always captures my attention, since we are Dove of Peace Lutheran Church, named for the Holy Spirit, the heavenly dove. The image is anachronistic—Solomon was not a Christian, and the Bible never says anything about his praying to the Holy Spirit. But the medieval artist's imagination allowed him to conceive that Solomon's request for wisdom was truly, on some level, an inquiry of the Holy Spirit. The Dove. And if Solomon can gain wisdom from the Holy Spirit, then you and I who are already gifted with the Holy Spirit through our baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— you and I can gain holy wisdom as well. We can be little Solomons in our lives, wise and discerning. Maybe without all of the harems and concubines

and gold. But the Holy Spirit can indeed help us to understand. It can help us to discern. It can help us to pray, to know how to ask God, and what to ask God.

So ask the Holy Spirit. Ask for wisdom. For insight, knowledge, perspective. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see around corners, to see things from other angles. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you speak the right things, or to remain silent. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to that mustard seed, to that yeast, to that precious pearl that you might otherwise miss. The kingdom of God is even greater than the kingdom of Solomon. [Matthew 6:29; Luke 11:31] Ask the Holy Spirit to show you. Amen.