

Praying for Wisdom
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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1 Kings 3:4-9, 16-28; Matthew 6:9-10

In case you don't remember this one: In the middle of the monthly Church Council meeting, a pastor is visited by an angel, who tells her, *"Because of your unselfish and exemplary service, I will reward you with either wisdom, wealth, or beauty."*

"Give me wisdom," the pastor replies without hesitation. *"Done!"* says the angel. All heads turn to the pastor, who sits with a barely detectable halo around her head. *"Well,"* says the moderator of the congregation, *"say something brilliant."*

The pastor stands and with the wisdom of Solomon she says, *"I should have taken the money."*

So here's the scene... King David has just died and there's a power struggle for the throne between David's two sons, Adonijah (the older, consensus pick) and Solomon (the young upstart backed by a trio of cunning political operatives led by Bathsheba, the Queen mum).

To translate for our times, think... Game of Thrones meets a Fox presidential debate.

Today's passage skips over much of the messy business, but let's just say there's some R-rated manipulation, banishment, vendettas, exploitation, and bloodshed. Solomon learns his brutal approach from his cunning old man, King David. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, *"The simple rule is to reward friends and destroy enemies..."*

Once in power, Solomon does his best as a young, rookie king. He's giving it everything he's got to stay popular. He walks in all the parades, gives plenty of press conferences, and sacrifices only the best grass-fed organic animals raised solely on promised land. Heck, the guy even uses BPA-free incense! (Or, something like that.)

And Solomon's not doing too badly! In fact, under his rule, Israel experienced a "golden age" the likes of which no other ancient king was able to replicate.

Solomon was to Ancient Israel in the 10th century BC what the Medici family was to Italy in the 16th century AD. Like his father, Solomon wrote music that became part of the nation's top 40, he encouraged the cultivation and collection of poetry, so much so that the genre of literature that we now know as "Wisdom" in the Hebrew Bible (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) was traditionally accredited to him.

Perhaps the most notable of his endeavors was the architectural and public works projects that he accomplished during his reign. Solomon not only constructed the Jerusalem Temple, he radically expanded the size of the capital city. He built tall, fortress like walls that protected them from foreign invaders. For about forty years, anyway.

Whenever Solomon employed his God-given wisdom, Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity, and when he did not, Israel suffered mightily.

Just after he became King, he was asked to settle a dispute between two women, one the mother of an infant who had been accidentally smothered, and the other whose son was stolen by the grieving mother and taken as her own. Both claimed the child. In the end, Solomon revealed that the true mother was the one who would give her son away in order to save his life. The fraudulent mother was the one who would have the child literally split between the two of them with the King's sword.

The willingness to divide, it seems, is not an indication of love.

The story of Solomon doesn't end there, however. If we read on, we learn that this king was not inherently wise all of the time. In fact, he not only made foolish decisions, but some of them brought about the downfall of the nation! His worst mistakes, according to biblical historians, were these:

- 1) Solomon used forced labor to complete his public works projects
- 2) He taxed his subjects too heavily, and
- 3) He built shrines to the gods that his foreign wives worshipped

These three boneheaded decisions were the undoing of Ancient Israel. They led to a split between the Northern and Southern kingdoms, and provided the opportunity for mighty Babylon to attack, subdue, and lead the people into exile.

Ironically, despite all his other contributions to the political and cultural life of Ancient Israel, historians ultimately remember King Solomon as a foolish man rather than as a wise one.

So what can we learn from his successes and his failures?

Intelligence and wisdom are not the same thing. King Solomon was probably better educated than all his predecessors to the throne, and yet there came a point in his reign when none of his knowledge mattered, because he allowed his judgment to become skewed.

He started believing the headlines about his greatness.

He lost his sense of humility.

He allowed the worship of other gods to commence and to be supported by the state.

Worst of all, he started to think of himself as a god, and he began to see God as his servant rather than the other way around.

Solomon knew the law prohibited enslaving Hebrew subjects. He knew the law prohibited bankrupting the poor. He knew the Law prohibited the worship of other gods — but he permitted all of these things to occur on his watch, because he believed the hype about his own greatness.

Another lesson we can learn from Solomon's mistakes is the importance of discernment. You see... the world will say that might makes right, that power and privilege are tools to lord over others, so we must discern a better way, together, and share the Gospel's good news that love wins through humility and loving-kindness.

The world will say that you and I are not good enough, not smart enough, not pretty or handsome enough, not wealthy enough, so we must discern a better way together, and share the Gospel's good news that each and every one of us are made in the very image of God.

And the world may even say that religion is a sham—too difficult, too old-fashioned—that our strange words and ancient ways have met their match with science's latest discoveries, so we must discern together and share the Gospel good news that God has called to use our all our minds and hearts to bring our world God's love.

Discernment. that's such a churchy word, isn't it? I think that's okay. Because as Christians, we must model another way.

Discernment comes from being part of a spiritual community that teaches us the timeless truths of our faith tradition, one that supports our development through religious education, congregational worship, and spiritual practices that nourish us, and that holds us accountable for our actions and inactions.

To be sure, our lives are filled with numerous challenges and difficult decisions. We cannot avoid the ethical dilemmas we face in these times. The opportunity before us is to embrace the wisdom of our faith tradition, and to apply this wisdom in our daily lives as best we are able. We can do this best by staying grounded in our faith community, which can provide the support, guidance, and nurture that we need to stay strong in the struggle to do what is right, good, and fitting. So that we may lead with love.

It is one thing to speak of faith, but it is another thing to live it – and to live it to the point that we then have wisdom to pass down to the generations to come. And living it is not always easy. In this time in our world when we have a major war that continues to rage on, when the healthcare debate looms large, when we cannot seem to come together to address gun violence, when immigration is an issue – we are called to proclaim peace and to work toward bringing it about.

We are called to respond to everyday situations with a wisdom that is deeper than mere book learned knowledge. Instead we are invited to live each day in discernment with our faith as a guide. That is the difference between asking God to be a magic genie and give us power and riches – and entering into a covenant with God that invites God’s wisdom and power into our lives.

The world’s wisdom says do your own thing, take care of yourself and get ahead, while God’s wisdom says serve with the gifts I have given you following me, and I will be certain that you are taken care of. *“Ask and it shall be given unto you. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened unto you.”*

My prayer for us today is that we learn from both the wisdom and the foolishness of our ancestors, and our own experience, so that we might become as wise as Solomon, so that God’s hope for all of our lives may be fulfilled. Amen.