

August 15th, 2021

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 “The Politics of Wisdom”

The good news is that for the most part, we are finished with King David. Today we got to hear David’s parting words to his son Solomon who he chose to be the next King of Israel. If you want to learn more about how this decision was made, come to Bible study when it resumes on September 2nd and we’ll take a stroll through the Books of Kings. For now, let’s just set David aside and focus on Solomon, who is often referred to as “King Solomon the Wise.” I’ll warn you now, we’ve got a lot of ground to cover. It took us 10 Sundays to explore King David’s reign, but we’ve only got 3 dedicated to Solomon.

The first question I want to ask this morning is, “What does it mean for a king or a leader to be wise?” For most of us in this room who’ve lived through various seasons of the 20th and 21st century, this seems to be an increasingly difficult question to answer. These days, it appears that the idea of wisdom in leadership implies that you can’t be entirely truthful, because that might undermine your standing as a leader. Because on one hand, you can’t come across as being too compassionate, because that might make you look weak. On the other hand, you can’t come across as being too hard-nosed because it might lead some to believe that you don’t care about the welfare of the people you lead. Taking this into account, we might be led to interpret wisdom as needing to give the appearance of being both commanding *and* compassionate while carefully protecting our political and economic interests. But that sounds dishonest which leads me to a second question: “Is wisdom just mastering the art of dishonesty?” Let’s hold on to that thought for a bit.

In our scripture reading for today, Solomon asks for wisdom in a dream, and because he seemed to get his priorities right, the text implies that God gave him a great deal of wealth as a fringe benefit for asking for wisdom. Here’s what happens - We’re told that the whole earth sought out King Solomon’s wisdom. In fact, people often brought gifts of silver and gold, horses and weapons, clothing and spices as a “thank

you” for the wisdom he offered. Then Solomon used these gifts to create a few nice buildings for himself and a temple for the God who he credited for giving him all this wisdom and wealth. And when the priests consecrated the temple, they sacrificed “so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted” (1 Kgs 8:5). Here in the story Mary read, when he first asked for wisdom Solomon made a thousand burnt offerings on the altar, so you can imagine how big those offerings for the temple must have been. So ... Solomon had the gift of wisdom. That’s what he asked for, and apparently that’s what he got, and according to this passage, he was grateful to God.

Now, I could wrap this sermon up right now by saying, “If you ask for wisdom instead of wealth, God will reward you with *both* just because it looks like you’re humble and have your priorities straight. So be good, say ‘thank you’ and everything will be awesome. Amen!” But that would be boring, wouldn’t it? And also irresponsible on my part as a minister because that’s clearly not the case. And I’ve got Jesus to back me up on that one too!

So, what is wisdom? Some say that wisdom is the ability to discern what is right from what is wrong. Or if you want to notch it up another level, wisdom is the ability to discern good from evil. And that sounds reasonable too. Except that’s what got Adam and Eve into trouble in the story of the Garden of Eden from Genesis. They were told not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but they did anyway, and everything went downhill from there. One of the lessons from the story of Eden is that wisdom can only be given by God, not taken. So, wisdom is not the problem, intent is the problem.

Let’s take a look at how Solomon used his gift of wisdom and how that helped him as King. Remember that Solomon was set up to be the best king Israel ever had. He was supposed to be greater than his father David which, after ten weeks of analyzing his reign as king didn’t seem like a very difficult task. But, like David, Solomon got caught up in the trap of being the ruler of an up-and-coming nation in a 10th century BC

middle eastern nation. And as George RR Martin once wrote, “When you play the game of thrones you live or die. There is no middle ground.” Being a king in those days meant that in order to keep up with the other nations, you had to “out-king” the other kings. Or at the very least try to keep up. Let’s take a peek at how well Solomon kept up.

In 1 Kings 11, we learn that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. That adds up to 1,000. Think about that. To give you some perspective 1,000 days is a quarter shy of 3 years. Among Solomon’s wives was the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh which seems odd considering the bad history Israel had with Egypt. Israel spent 430 years as slaves in Egypt. If you consider a generation to be 40 years, that’s almost 11 generations of Israelites that were slaves in Egypt. Consider also that one of the greatest defining moments in the entire Jewish faith was escaping from Egyptian slavery. Some might say, “What’s the big deal with Solomon marrying an Egyptian princess? Isn’t that what you do when you want to make an alliance with a neighboring nation? The King of the neighboring nation is less likely to go to war with you if his daughter is living in your palace. Besides, the Exodus from Egypt was ... what ... 470 years ago? Isn’t it time to let bygones be bygones?” The problem is, Solomon was being just like a Pharaoh by using slaves to build all of his monuments, *including the temple!* Wise old King Solomon couldn’t have been *that* bad, could he? Well, let’s see what Solomon’s son Rehoboam said about his dad’s use of slaves. When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam tried to succeed him. When the northern tribes of Israel were trying to figure out whether they’d follow him or not, they brought up this question of using forced labor. They wanted to know if Rehoboam was going to do the same thing. His reply? “My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions!” Sounds like someone went to super villain school.

Clearly Rehoboam didn’t inherit the wisdom of his father because he ended up losing the support of all but two of the Israelite tribes. That’s when Israel became a divided nation which led to the Babylonian

Empire conquering them and exiling their leaders to the Babylonian capital where they would remain for the next 70 years. So let's go back to the original two questions I posed – “What does it mean for a king or a leader to be wise?” and “Is wisdom just mastering the art of dishonesty?” If that's the case, then Solomon was wise and his son Rehoboam wasn't. Solomon got away with being like a Pharaoh. His son didn't. Funny how that happens with kings and leaders. One can literally get away with murder and another can't get away with *anything*.

During the 40 years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness after they escaped from Pharaoh, they spent their time, energy and resources establishing their identity and learning what God expected of them. That's where they received the Law of Moses which would lay out the way they lived and how they would govern the Promised Land once they got there. God had some *very* clear instructions for those who would be leaders. In the Book of Deuteronomy, God made it known that Israel must not acquire great numbers of horses, or make the people return to Egypt to get more horses. God said that Israel's rulers must not take many wives, or their hearts will be led astray. God also said they were not to accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. I don't know about you, but it seems like Solomon gets a check mark for everything on the “not to do” list. That doesn't seem so wise does it?

Ok, then let's go back to that first question I brought to the table - “What does it mean for a king or a leader to be wise?” In verse 9 of 1 Kings 3, Solomon asked for the wisdom to distinguish between good and evil. As I mentioned before, that echoes back to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They ate from the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil and they got in trouble for it because God had told them not to eat from that tree. Wisdom can't be taken it must be given. Solomon didn't take ... he asked, and it was given to him. But how did he *use* this gift? What was his intent? The *knowledge* of good and evil can be dangerous and corrupting. When you look at the legacy of Solomon's life, it becomes apparent that *his* “wisdom” led to corruption and alienation from God. You can have all the knowledge in the world about

the difference between good and evil, but wisdom requires that you always use it for good. Or as a wise man once said, “Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit- wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.”

I considered using this week’s lectionary Psalm as a call to worship this morning until I thought about it and realized that it would be the perfect conclusion to the message – Hear these words from the 111th Psalm

Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.

Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.

His praise endures forever.