

THE WISE KING: AN UNDERSTANDING MIND – August 16, 2015

Scripture: 1 Kings 3:3-14 (14)

Unison: (print in the bulletin, please) **Proverbs 9:1-6**

Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
from the highest places in the town,
“You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

Hymns: 1) #1 “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” 2) #292 “Breathe on Me, Breath of God
3) #8 “Praise to the Living God”

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: As we gather to sing and praise,

People: We give thanks to God.

L: As we prepare to discern and understand,

P: We give thanks to God.

L: As we open ourselves to wisdom and truth,

P: We give thanks to God.

INVOCATION & LORD’S PRAYER

God of mercy and compassion, forgive our foolish ways, and guide us back to your wisdom and truth. Feed us from the bread of your life and love, so that we are not distracted or misguided. Show us the path of wisdom, so that we may walk with you all of our days. We pray this in the name of Jesus: “Our Father...”

THE SERMON

This week, our attention turns to King Solomon, son of David. A Bible character well known even by people with little Bible knowledge. I'll bet when I said Solomon, your minds went to that story, the one about dividing the baby which showed his wisdom. Or maybe, the story about impressing the queen of Sheba with his wisdom. These stories highlight the wisdom that Solomon asked for and received when God promised to grant his request --whatever it might be.

Today's scripture is the passage where that happens: God says to Solomon, "Tell me what I should give you." Solomon was pretty young at the time, thought calling himself "a little child," as he says to God, is exaggeration; he was probably about 20. In his reply to God's question, Solomon begins by giving thanks for God's faithfulness to David, and naming—in very flattering terms—the ways David was righteous and faithful to God. Solomon cites the expansive and populous nature of the Kingdom. And he asks: "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this your great people?" Interesting isn't it? What he asks for is an understanding mind, to enable him to govern --and the ability to discern between good and evil.

God is very pleased that Solomon has asked for this rather than wealth or long life or victory over enemies. And God gives Solomon "a wise and discerning mind" as well as all those other things. God also offers a promise: David was a great king, but Solomon will be even greater, richer, live longer, so long as he keeps the statutes and commandments of God.

Solomon did have a long reign. He lived to be about 80, so his kingship was 60 years. He built God a glorious temple of precious materials all covered over with gold. He was wise in many ways. He was a great king of Israel and he is even named in the Koran as a major prophet. He made the kingdom great with treaties benefiting Israel, sealed with marriage of a princess of each of the allies to Solomon. According to the Bible he had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

But the same thing that dogged his father David were even more extreme for Solomon: overconfidence. He placed excessive reliance on military strength and his own strength as a king, rather than empowering his people. He was unfaithful-not like David with another man's wife, but unfaithful to God, by allowing his many wives to worship their native gods. In the end Solomon himself worshipped many of the local deities instead of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David.

God appeared to Solomon near the end of his life, warning him and then punishing him for this unfaithfulness. True to God's word, when Solomon died and was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, the kingdom divided. Rehoboam was rejected by ten of the twelve tribes of Israel, retaining only David's city Jerusalem and the land around it. There was war and political strife.

The kingdom became two: in the south, in Jerusalem, the kingdom of Judah, and in the north, the kingdom of Israel, ruled by Solomon's regional governor, Jeroboam.

Before all this happened though, when Solomon was still attentive to God and God's purposes, he recorded his wisdom in several books which became part of the Hebrew Bible: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon aka the Song of Songs. Some other books were begun by Solomon but were edited and include material by others as well; they are considered apocryphal: important but not part of the official Bible: the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach.

Over the next few weeks, I want to focus on this wisdom literature of Solomon's. We know a little bit of it very well – "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven..." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) But there are parts less well known which are also important for us as people of faith. Particularly the parts having to do with the character of Wisdom.

What are the qualities of the wise? The Bible lists wise behaviors: measured in speech, fair in consideration, discerning of mind, well educated. And it lists of responsibilities too, particularly towards the poor, a major concern of the wisdom writings of Solomon. This wisdom literature lifts up the importance of truthfulness, faithfulness, and trustworthiness in small things as a precursor, as training for the larger work of God, which people of faith are always being prepared to do.

Listen while I read aloud Proverbs 1:20-33 – which will help us see what wisdom meant to Solomon.

Proverbs 1:20-33

Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.

At the busiest corner she cries out;

at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?"

Give heed to my reproof;

I will pour out my thoughts to you;

I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,

and because you have ignored all my counsel

and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you,

when panic strikes you like a storm,

and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you.

Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;

they will seek me diligently, but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord,

would have none of my counsel,

and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices.

For waywardness kills the simple,

and the complacency of fools destroys them; but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

May I introduce you to: Lady Wisdom! One of the least known, but most profound female images in the Bible. She is not exactly a part of God but personified separately from God. She's a bridge character, in some sense.

In this passage and in today's unison reading, we see that wisdom is given a personality and a voice, and is active in the world. Not just something you "have" but something that is intended to go forth, with intentionality and personality.

God gave wisdom to Solomon, but not in the sense of creating something new, or even the sense of something special! Wisdom is not a secret. She calls out, shouts, stands where everyone can see her. Like one of my toddler children shouting: "you listen to me!"

Wisdom is available for us all. What Solomon asked for, God is eager to give to any of us, if we will pay attention. If we will make use of it. If we will use it, for God's purposes of love and care for all people and all the world, not for personal gain and glory.

So the story of Solomon is exemplary, both in his asking for and listening to the voice of wisdom, and for what happened when he abandoned it. I'll share more next week on the persona of Lady Wisdom, and the wisdom of God.

For now, the take-aways from this story of Solomon receiving wisdom are:

God has, in fact, always made available the wisdom we need to live a righteous life. Much like the scarecrow, tin man, and lion of the Wizard of Oz, wisdom has already been within us, if we would only listen for it and recognize that we already have it.

This kind of wisdom is more than just good advice, more than just righteous or smart behavior, although those things are elements that show the presence of wisdom. The wisdom that comes to us from God is a point of view, and a cultivated relationship of our minds—not just our souls but also our thinking, choosing minds—with God.

We, however, are experts at ignoring and twisting the wisdom. Even when it shouts right in our faces. Like Dorothy's companions in Oz, we can't see that we already have wisdom. We twist it in our own egos to serve our own purposes. And that ignoring and twisting becomes a habit until we are drawn, like Solomon, farther and farther away from God. Which is the definition of sin, isn't it?

In this Old Testament passage, in this context, we see both the possibility and the hopelessness...we can allow Wisdom to work and draw us closer to God, but many of us, many times, act as though it is only the last resort. As though we should be able to figure this out with our emotions, not resorting to higher knowledge... and Wisdom laughs in our faces when things go bad.

Lucky for us....no, more than luck, thankfully—God is more than Wisdom, more than this bridge between the mind of God and our minds—God is the one who dwells within us as the Holy Spirit and guides us out of the ditch and darkness and back onto the right path and into the light. God is the one who came and lived with us AS one of us, sharing the teachings of wisdom and one more thing: the graciousness of God.

Our ability to reason, to choose, to think, to discern—is God given. It is one of the gifts of our creator that defines us as humans, and allows us to perceive that we are made in God's image, and that all of us—the ones who listen to the invitation of wisdom and the ones who do not—can be glorious, if we will allow God to work in us, and if we will stop clinging to our own sense of autonomy and instead see that Jesus' command to love one another and care for one another is the path to our true selves.

Wisdom is calling in the street! Where will you hear her voice this week? Perk up your ears, sharpen your mind, and next Sunday we will think more about Lady Wisdom and how God works in each of us.