

A Sermon by Rev. Eric Dillenbeck
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
August 16, 2009
Discerning Spirit
Text: 1 Kings 2:10-12 & 3:3-14

The last time I preached we followed the story of David, the beloved and adored new King of Israel. He tried to build a new home for the Lord, but was reminded that God provides our home. David also received the blessings of God and the sure promise that God would raise up his son to rule in his place.

Our passage for today takes place more than 40 years later and builds on this promise.

1 Kings 2:10-12 & - 3:3-14

¹⁰Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. ¹¹The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem.

¹²So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

Chapter 3

³Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. ⁴The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

⁵At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you."

⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.

⁷And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.

⁹Give 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?"

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

"Discerning Spirit"

David has died, and the succession of Solomon, one of David's children, has taken place. The promise is fulfilled. Of course this transition did not happen as easily as God's promise or our text would have led me to expect. There was much drama involved in the turnover of power. It was not a peaceful family discussion, but rather a bloody battle among family for the throne of David.

Scripture tells us that Solomon emerges over the likes of Absalom and Adonijah, his brothers, as well as other political and military figures who had sights on the throne. Lethal force was used to ensure his grasp on power.

I bring this up for two reasons. First, to highlight how exciting the stories are in Scripture. The Old Testament alone is filled with stories of intrigue, political gamesmanship and power struggles worthy of any modern novel you would find at Barnes and Noble.

Second, I tell you all of this about Solomon because in today's passage, he comes across as this pious and Godly young man who was simply in over his head, who was somehow thrust into this role. But the wider story of Solomon tells us that he was cunning and knew what he wanted.

With this in mind I was a bit surprised by Solomon's reaction to Yahweh's question: "what can I give you?" I would have expected Solomon to ask for wealth and protection, but instead he asks for something beyond himself. He goes and asks for an "understanding mind that is able to discern between good and evil."

Now that he recognizes that he is the undisputed king, maybe Solomon finally understood he was in over his head. I don't know...

Whatever the reasons were for Solomon to ask for an understanding mind, we can see that God gives him a "wise and discerning mind;" wisdom that is vividly demonstrated in the story just after our text for today.

There were two women who came to Solomon, both claiming the same child as their own. You see, they both were prostitutes, they lived together and had babies about the same time. Tragically, one of the mothers rolled over on her child in the night, suffocating it. So she secretly replaced her dead child for the other mother's living child. When that mother awoke, she was shocked to see a dead baby. But, when she really looked she knew this was not her child.

So both mothers come to Solomon asking for him to rule between them. Solomon asks for a sword and commands that the baby be cut in two so that each one could have a half. One of the women said, "Yes, that is fine. That way neither of us will have him." But the real mother, of course, protested and insisted that the child remain alive even if it was given to the wrong mother. Thus Solomon wisely knew who the real mother was.

A wise and discerning mind...

In making his request, Solomon might have understood that running a kingdom is complicated and messy; that decisions are not always clear cut or easy to make. He was asking for wisdom that would equip him to choose between good and evil to help him discern the right way to move forward when the way forward is not clear.

I've heard the difference between being smart and being wise described as follows:

Being smart is knowing the truth about something. Being wise is applying that (knowledge) so that it affects the way you live. (*REPEAT*)

By my measure Solomon was a pretty smart cookie. He knew enough to get him to that point in his life, but he understood that getting there was the easy part. He was seeking wisdom, so that he could live in ways that would keep him there. And by all measure he did live that way for awhile. He was the Son of David who had the temple for God built and he encouraged authors to create wisdom literature like the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes which are included in our Bibles.

But as time passed he forgot who gave this wonderful gift of wisdom. He got comfortable and thought he knew all things. He married multiple foreign princesses and welcomed their gods into Israel, a big no-no with God; He was brutal with the people of his kingdom, taxing them very heavily and requiring them to work on his building projects. He was so brutal that when he died Israel split into two kingdoms. He forgot who he was and from whom his gifts came.

When we forget ourselves and start to believe that the gifts are rights; that we've earned all we've been given, there is when we fail. As a young man, Solomon asked God to help him and to guide him because he knew he couldn't do it himself. Later in life, when he had more experience, he began to get cocky and think that he had earned all the wisdom he had. This, unfortunately, is a mistake we all tend to make.

Wisdom...

We could all do with a little more wisdom, with a little more knowing that informs our living. I think our public discourse and decision making these days would benefit from a measure of wisdom...

Conversations and discussion in Town Hall Meetings about the future of our health care are drowned out by shouting and jeering crowds; Wars rage in far away countries that are having a huge impact upon our lives; Over population, deforestation, shrinking ice caps, and other ecological dilemmas threaten the planet entrusted to our care; Financial woes continue to plague our pocket books as our economy lurches forwards and backwards, looking for sure footing in these uncertain times.

Clearly the array of problems facing our corporate life are varied and multi-faceted and clearly everyone has a different solution for the problems facing us. I am sure the same can be said for the problems and issues we all face each day in our personal lives. Each separate issue is connected, one to another, as if by string. And when we pick up one piece to deal with it the others teeter on the shelf we have packed them onto.

These problems confront our fears on a number of different levels and cast a cloud upon the path forward. We are not always sure which steps to take and when to take them. Like Solomon's kingdom, life is messy and complicated. It is easy to become frozen by our uncertainty and do nothing because we are afraid of doing the wrong thing.

So we pray for an understanding mind so that we might discern the way forward. Discernment can be tricky though. It goes against our natural tendencies. We want to move forward, to act, but sometimes we just need to stop and listen, to gain perspective and knowledge so that our knowing can impact our living. This means slowing down and paying attention to God's presence through prayer and relationship.

Our Presbyterian system is filled with opportunities for discernment. We make fun of committees all the time, but we believe God's Spirit not only speaks to us, but also to those around us so we share ideas around the table and listen together for God's Spirit leading the way.

We pick up one problem or opportunity at a time and pull on all the strings attached to it. We stand together and make faithful decisions, and take bold and confident steps into the promises God has given.

We don't always move as fast as we could and we don't always get it right. The same can be said for the decisions we live into each and every day in our personal lives, but rest assured that God's love and grace sustains us.

Why? Why can I rest easy knowing that God's grace sustains me even in my mistakes? Because it is the very human, selfish, negligent Solomon who benefits from God's self-revelation and gifts. And Solomon loved God with conditions. But God appeared to him. Such is the nature of God in scripture. God responds to the imperfect love, and inadequate responses of mortals with undeserved blessings and with a summons to yet again love and obey.

In the days, weeks and months to come may we open our ears and listen for God's still small voice speaking to us this day. And once we hear, may we boldly respond to God's call to love and obey so that our knowing may impact our living.
To God be the Glory.