

## “A Wealth of Wisdom”

1 Kings 2:1-12; 3:3-15 (NRSV)

Today we say goodbye to King David and hello to King Solomon.

Some of you, I know, are thrilled that we are saying sayonara to David after seemingly spending endless weeks on his story and you are glad to get to somebody new. But you may be thinking – “*Oh no, if David’s story took all summer, how long is Solomon’s gonna be?*” Well, fear not. We are only spending a couple of weeks with Solomon before moving on to something new altogether. This transition between King David to King Solomon, between father and son, is an important one in the history of Israel, so it’s definitely worth our attention today.

Transitions in leadership are never crisp and clean, are they? Often we make a departing leader into a saint, celebrating the good stuff and glossing over the not-so-good stuff. And sometimes that person forever

becomes a measuring stick for the person who follows. He or she leaves a legacy, and it’s up to the successor to decide how to leverage that legacy – what to continue, what to stop, what to adapt – all the while trying to pave his or her own way.

And even as some people might still be pining away for the former leader, in general for most people, there is a sense of great excitement when a new leader begins because it’s a new opportunity for things to be different, a chance for new gifts to be explored, new skills to be used, new philosophies to be tried. The new leader brings their expertise and experience to the role and it’s exciting as they acclimate and learn their new culture and people and priorities and responsibilities. Anything is possible on day one! Right David and Denise?<sup>1</sup> ☺ All is well with the new leader...until it’s not...because at some point or another, it won’t be. As Dr. Seuss writes

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<sup>1</sup> Today is the first Sunday at Calvary for Dr. David Farwig, Director of Music, and Denise Lanning, Organist.

in his book of wisdom, *Oh, The Places You'll Go!*:

*You'll be on your way up!  
You'll be seeing great sights!  
You'll join the high fliers  
who soar to high heights.*

*You won't lag behind, because  
you'll have the speed.  
You'll pass the whole gang and  
you'll soon take the lead.  
Wherever you fly, you'll be best  
of the best.  
Wherever you go, you will top  
all the rest.*

*Except when you don't.  
Because, sometimes, you won't.*

*I'm sorry to say so  
but, sadly, it's true  
that Bang-ups  
and Hang-ups  
can happen to you.<sup>2</sup>*

Indeed. Bang-ups and hang-ups will happen. They'll happen to Solomon for sure. And in fact, just like his father David, Solomon actually causes his bang-ups and hang-ups. We'll soon see that the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree.

Now as David is dying, he seems (at first) to impart words of true wisdom to his son,

Solomon: *"My son, I will soon die, as everyone must. But I want you to be strong and brave. Do what the Lord your God commands and follow his teachings. Obey everything written in the Law of Moses. Then you will be a success, no matter what you do or where you go,"* (1 Kings 2:1-3, CEV).

These are good words, right? Focused on God. Focused on getting Solomon focused on God. They show, perhaps, that David has learned from his mistakes from when he was too ego-driven. But alas, he keeps talking...when he should have stopped right there! He moves from imparting wisdom to giving more self-centered advice, *"You and your descendants must always faithfully obey the Lord. If you do, he will keep the solemn promise he made to me that someone from our family will always be king of Israel,"* (1 Kings 2:4, CEV).

In a way, these are words of warning for Solomon to obey God "or else," but they are also words of self-preservation so that David's legacy and lineage is preserved. He wants Solomon to do well as king –

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<sup>2</sup> Text of book accessed on August 19, 2018 at <http://denuccio.net/ohplaces.html>.

not just because it honors God and serves the people, but also because it means David's reign will live on and on and will be seen in a positive light.

And then, David moves from giving self-centered advice to flat-out ego-driven, malicious advice. In chapter 2, beginning with verse 5, the advice David starts offering Solomon is all about who wronged David and who didn't, telling Solomon, essentially, to "settle the score" for him. In the text, these are the last words David speaks before he dies in verse 10.

Words of revenge and retribution. Not exactly the "man after God's own heart" that we want to remember.

David's last words are essentially a "*demand for two contract killings, first on his oldest friend and supporter, general Joab, and second on a very old man who cursed the king long days ago as he was fleeing the city of Jerusalem, running away from his usurping son, Absalom.*"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Holbert, "Avoiding the Truth: Reflections on 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14," *Patheos.com* (16 August 2015), accessed on August 19, 2018 at <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/avoiding-the-truth-john-c-holbert-08-10-2015.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Holbert, *ibid.*

And Solomon fulfills David's wishes and more. He has Joab and Shemei killed and he has his half-brother killed because he married one of their father's concubines and claimed he was to be the heir to the throne... and he banished the priest who believed his half-brother and wanted to make him king instead of Solomon!<sup>4</sup>

Not exactly an honorable start to Solomon's reign, is it? Both David and Solomon are all too human, filled with ambition for power, lust for fame and fortune, and desiring revenge on enemies, real or perceived... to the point of breaking a commandment and committing murder<sup>5</sup>... even after David, just verses before, told Solomon to *honor all the commandments!* It's like he can't even see his own hypocrisy. Power has swallowed his perspective and he creates exceptions for himself as king that are beyond the law.

Already Solomon is proving to be a complex mix of ruthlessness and faithfulness.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Holbert *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Howard Wallace, "1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14," *Uniting Church* (16 August 2009), accessed on 19 August 2018 at <http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/OrdinaryB/Pentecost11.html>.

We've just heard the ruthlessness. What about the faithfulness?

We are told in chapter 3 verse 3 that "*Solomon loved the Lord.*" That faithfulness will dominate the account of Solomon's reign through to 1 Kings 10. However, the writers tell us "*Only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.*"<sup>7</sup>

That may sound good to our modern ears, but back then, it was heretical. Why? The "high places" were originally Canaanite sanctuaries, now used by Israelites to worship the Lord, although the old connection with the worship of Baal and other Canaanite deities was never really forgotten. A cloud of polytheism kind of hovers over Solomon's actions here. His worship seems to have split loyalties, even if he doesn't mean for that to be so.

One day Solomon is praying at one of these controversial high places – Gibeon – which is the highest of high places and his sacrificial rites were extra lavish (v. 4). While he was

there the Lord appeared to him in a dream.<sup>8</sup> In his dream Solomon is given a choice of anything he wants from the Lord.

Now, this might make God sound seem a bit like a genie in a bottle or like something out of the Disney movie *Aladdin*. But there are key differences. Aladdin gets three wishes, while Solomon is invited to pray for one thing. Aladdin asks for things that will benefit him alone, while Solomon asks for the one thing that will benefit the Kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup>

Solomon's reply to God's question seems to be a faith-filled one. He notes the Lord's great faithfulness to the covenant with David but is aware at the same time of the burden of kingship and he asks for wisdom to govern the people with understanding and justice (3:7-9). To stress his need he proclaims that he is "*only a little child,*" seemingly inexperienced in the ways of how to lead God's people (v. 7).<sup>10</sup>

God is over-the-top-giddy with Solomon's response, since he

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<sup>7</sup> Wallace, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Stan Mast, "1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14," *Calvin Seminary: Center for Excellence in Preaching* (13

August 2018), accessed on August 19, 2018 at [http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-15b/?type=old\\_testament\\_lectionary](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-15b/?type=old_testament_lectionary).

<sup>10</sup> Wallace, *ibid.*

had asked for wisdom to rule rather than wealth and the life of his enemies. And so God grants Solomon's request (v12). But in what might seem like a surprising move, God also promises wealth and honor and a long life – things that Solomon *did not* ask for (v13).<sup>11</sup>

This sounds, again, too good to be true...and, come to find out, there is a condition. God says it all depends on whether or not Solomon will “*walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments.*” It is not so much whether Solomon will continue to observe the religious rituals, or how lavish his offerings will be, but how he lives as a human being and as a king.<sup>12</sup> So far his track record isn't great. But it's as if for God, this is a fresh start for Solomon. The evidence of God's grace in this moment is overwhelming. And it is proof that while elements of God's covenant like wealth and honor and longevity are conditional – God's love and grace are *not*. This is good news for ALL OF US! God never abandons God's people...including their king. And while Solomon's actions are horrific at times, his prayer

for wisdom is honorable, and we would be wise not to dismiss it – even if we despise the actions of the man who prayed it.

Wisdom, is, indeed, what we need to navigate the complexities of life. It is more than intelligence, right? More than an encyclopedic grasp of multiple facts, more, even, than a practical understanding of how life should be lived. Wisdom has a relational component; the connection with God (or a higher power) is at the heart of it (Proverbs 1:7, et al). And it has an ethical component; Solomon prays for the ability to discern between right and wrong. And it has an emotional component, the ability to govern one's emotions and desires. With wisdom, ideally, we might live in relational harmony, ethical correctness, and emotional control. What a gift that would be! Who shouldn't pray for that?<sup>13</sup> Imagine that kind of world?!

As Eugene Peterson interprets it in *The Message*, Solomon prays in 1 Kings 3:1-9:

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<sup>11</sup> Wallace, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Mast, *ibid.*

*“And now here I am: God, my God, you have made me, your servant, ruler of the kingdom in place of David my father. I’m too young for this, a mere child! I don’t know the ropes, hardly know the ‘ins’ and ‘outs’ of this job. And here I am, set down in the middle of the people you’ve chosen, a great people—far too many to ever count.*

*“Here’s what I want: Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil. For who on their own is capable of leading your glorious people?”*

What strikes me about this dream prayer is how many times Solomon mentions that he is aware that he is in the midst of God’s people. There is a sense of community here that cannot be denied. Even though he hasn’t been worshipping at the right places or in the right ways, he knows that his place as King is in the midst of God’s people. For this brief moment – Solomon understands that there will be key moments of deciding *will I serve myself or will I serve others?* These

moments are the essence of our humanity. When push comes to shove, will we put ourselves first or others?

Both in Hebrew and in Greek the word for wisdom is feminine. “Sophia” in ancient Greek translates to “wisdom,” and from this we derive the words “philosophy” and “sophisticated.” The Hebrew word for wisdom, חֵכְמָה or *chokmah*, is also a feminine noun. Scholars assert that in the scriptures wisdom is both a part of God and apart from God, which enables it to be that thing that connects us to God. In other words, *Sophia* wisdom is the relational bridge between us and God.

Scholar Elaine Pagels says of this personified wisdom: *“In the Book of Proverbs, wisdom is God’s partner, or darling, God’s delight. The idea is that wisdom is a personified feminine being who is with God and helps him out.”*<sup>14</sup>

And Sister Joyce Rupp writes about the *Sophia* wisdom tradition saying: *“We need to look for Sophia. By her very nature she is relational, present*

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<sup>14</sup> Antonia Blumberg, “Sophia: The Christian Mystic’s Path To Wisdom,” *The Huffington Post* (17 July 2014), accessed on August 19, 2018 at

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/17/sophia-christian-wisdom\\_n\\_5589360.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/17/sophia-christian-wisdom_n_5589360.html).

*in the world, interacting among people and ordinary human lives. By desiring to know her, by opening our minds and hearts, her radiance will permeate our lives.*"<sup>15</sup>

Even Jimi Hendrix personifies wisdom saying, "*Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens.*"<sup>16</sup> Wisdom is not a passive thing we acquire, it is an active presence in our life that guides us. Let's think about the difference, for a moment, between advice and wisdom.

Think of someone who gives you good advice? What does that feel like and sound like?

Now think of someone who has been one of your greatest sources of wisdom? What does that feel like and sound like?

For me, people who give good advice are often giving me specific things to do my job better or to grow my leadership in more informed ways or to accomplish some life skill in a more effective or efficient way. Often that advice is based in their experiences and in their desires for what they want and need...it's the lens through

which they see the world. Advice is always helpful, especially when you consider the source and know when to heed it and when to ignore it. Not all advice needs to be taken, even if it does need to be heard.

Wisdom is different though, isn't it? People who are wise teach by their example and often by asking questions rather than making statements or requests. Wisdom is often shared in a way that allows your voice to be part of the wisdom itself. It's not just one way like advice, it's both people sharing their experiences and hearing each other to come to a deeper understanding of something...a sense of shared wisdom. And your worldview is broadened, not narrowed.

There is a wealth of wisdom all around us. We just have to be tuned into it and open to receive it and contribute to it. This community is a wealth of wisdom. Look around. We are enriched by each other. When we share life together, our wisdom builds upon one another.

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<sup>15</sup> Blumberg, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Quote accessed on August 19, 2018 at <https://rocknrollcollegeofknowledge.wordpress.com/2012/09/05/hello-world/>.

We have our own leadership transitions going on, and I hate to disappoint you, but our transition is not nearly as sordid as David and Solomon's! Today at Calvary we welcome new leadership in our music ministry – David Farwig as our Director of Music and Denise Lanning as our Organist. As we have already experienced today, they have gifts and wisdom that will bring so much to our community. They both have been asking a lot of questions and learning a lot of the shared history and wisdom of our church, and I know we will do the same for them – allowing their unique voices and musicality to teach us things we did not know and to lift our spirits to God in ways we did not know they could be lifted. Will they be perfect? No. But neither are we perfect, Calvary.

Whenever we welcome new members to our staff, I share with staff that I feel it's an opportunity for all of us to "begin again" in terms of how we approach our ministries and our staff chemistry and our habits and ways of being in the office and in the church. Each person brings something different to the mix so we have

the opportunity to become wiser together by welcoming their wisdom to join ours. Rather than saying, "*this is how we've always done it*" we try to say, "*this is how we've been doing it recently and why, but we look forward to your input and experience and as we create something new together.*"

This is good, not just for a new staff member, but for any *new* thing in your life – a relationship, a job, a conversation, a travel experience, a new school year, a spiritual experience, etc. Wisdom is knowing that we always have the chance to welcome a new voice into our midst as a new manifestation of the presence of Christ...here to teach us something new about God and the way God is at work in the world.

Solomon prayed a good prayer, but he didn't necessarily let the wisdom he received from God in his dream change his perspective or way of doing things. It was a missed opportunity – with catastrophic effects.

We may not display the extremes that David and Solomon did in their behavior

and words, but we too are both faithful to God at times and self-serving and power-seeking at others. God promises Solomon wealth in this text for his faithfulness, but the real wealth comes in the wisdom we receive when we do recognize that we need God to help guide our way and that the people around us are our guides too...and in fact, are a key part of God's guidance and wisdom, not a hindrance to it. Wisdom is always about being open to possibility, even when we have no idea what that looks like down the road.

I leave you with a prayer from the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. Because it reminds me that wisdom is not about knowing all the answers...or doing all the right things...but wisdom is being willing to go where God leads...and to always seek God as you lead, and really, just as you live!

Despite his lack of knowing what God wanted for his life, Solomon's prayer is full of faithfulness and wisdom. You see, sometimes the answer isn't knowing all the answers. It's

just being open to the questions that are before us:

*My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am  
going.  
I do not see the road ahead of  
me.  
I cannot know for certain  
where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think that I  
am following  
your will does not mean that I  
am actually doing so.*

*But I believe that the desire to  
please you does in fact please  
you.  
And I hope I have that desire in  
all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do  
anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this, you  
will lead me by the right road  
though I may know nothing  
about it.*

*Therefore will I trust you  
always though I may seem to be  
lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever  
with me,  
and you will never leave me to  
face my perils alone.  
Amen.<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Merton, "The Merton Prayer," in *Seize the Day: Vocation, Calling, Work* (issue of *Reflections: A Magazine of Theological and Ethical Inquiry from Yale*)

*Divinity School* (2012), accessed on August 19, 2018 at <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/seize-day-vocation-calling-work/merton-prayer>.