

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, August 16, 2015)

**Text: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 (NRSV)**

Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established. Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The 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.

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." And 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. And 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. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. 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?" It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God 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, I 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. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

**Reflections by Pastor Donald: "Wisdom Quest"**

How do you make decisions? Do you just fall forward and hope for the best? Are there times you just wait and see what happens and sing, "que sera sera, whatever will be, will be?" Do you explore all the different options and compare and contrast? Maybe you make lists of pros and cons and go back and forth between them trying to weigh one against the other or get some sense of finality by letting the longer list "win."

Does God come into the picture at all? Do you ever seek God first and listen for God's leading before proceeding?

As I considered our text for today, I was tempted to see the story before us as just another Biblical example of how to make decisions and gain wisdom by putting God first in our lives. And, of course, this is never, ever a bad idea and something we should certainly strive for in the whole of our lives. Indeed, I have found that by going to God first before any of my other "divining rod" or "sheep skin" methods, my whole decision is put into perspective and my faith becomes stronger as I trust that God will provide the wisdom and the knowledge I need to proceed.

But digging deeper into the text and reading a slew of commentaries on the story before us today, I realized that there is so much more wisdom to be gained here than the simple adage, "put God first and the rest will follow."

For if you peer into the history surrounding these very prettily picked verses our lectionary pulls out for us today, you will see as commentator John C. Holbert, writing on Patheos does that, "...[lurking] below and behind these sweet words about David's death and Solomon's fervent love of YHWH are turbulent and cruel actions on the part of both of these kings."

I think that delving into the full and often horrifying picture of what really happened in history is vital to our understanding of how God works in our lives and within the world. Only by dealing with the truth of what has come before us and what is happening within us and around us right now can we truly be set free and receive the wisdom of our Creator.

As a way of seeking more deeply, I invite you to listen to two very different accounts of today's story that writer Debie Thomas spins for us in her essay, "A King's Tale."

Once upon a time, there was a wise prince. Following his father's death, the prince assumed his divinely appointed throne, married a beautiful princess from a neighboring kingdom, and settled down to govern his people to the glory of God. Soon afterwards, God appeared to him in a dream, and promised to grant the young royal whatever his heart desired.

Being a humble man, the king refused to ask for wealth, power, or long life, and instead replied thus: "I am only a child. Therefore give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, and to discern between good and evil."

God was so pleased with the king's request, he promised not only to grant it — to make this king the wisest human being in history — but to grant him every other measure of greatness as well. Untold wealth, matchless honor, and long life.

In time, the king's reputation for brilliance spread across the land. Nobles traveled from distant shores to hear his pithy sayings and witness his wise judgments. In accordance with his wisdom and God's blessing, the king's wealth and power grew beyond measure. He made strategic political and economic alliances; maintained fleets of ships; built gorgeous temples and palaces; traded in luxuries such as gold, silver, and ivory; penned the greatest wisdom literature of his time; presided over the Golden Age of his kingdom; and finally handed over the throne to his son after a peaceable reign of forty years.

By any measure, a "happily ever after" story.

Ah, but listen now to the same story illuminated for us from another perspective and a broader reading of scripture.

Once upon a time, there was a shrewd prince. Following the death of the king, the prince ordered the murder of his older brother — the rightful heir — and assumed his father's throne with blood on his hands. He spent the earliest days of his reign carrying out the vengeance killings his father had requested before his death. Then, believing himself to have divine wisdom and a divine mandate, he set out to build the kingdom of his dreams — a kingdom of wealth, prestige, and power.

The king's appetites were beyond excessive. To support his extravagant lifestyle, he levied taxes his subjects could not bear. To control knowledge, he gathered the surrounding world's wisdom traditions to himself. To complete his lavish building projects, he conscripted thousands of people into forced labor. To satisfy his desires, he assembled a harem of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. To quell his spiritual restlessness, he constructed pagan shrines and offered worship to gods who demanded child sacrifice.

The results of his choices were dire. By the end of his reign, his people could no longer bear the crushing burdens of taxation and slavery he had placed upon them. In the wake of his paganism, they could no longer differentiate between idolatry and worship. Because he had monopolized God to justify his personal brand of wisdom, his subjects had nowhere to turn for divine discernment or reparation.

Soon the king found himself confronted by enemies. Though he attempted to fight back, God's hand was against him, and he enjoyed little success. He died shortly thereafter, denied the long life he had dreamed of. His son then tried to force the disgruntled masses back into servitude, but they resisted, and a civil war that would last for decades broke out across the land. The kingdom split in two, and the famed king's once-golden dream dissolved into chaos.

By any measure, NOT "a happily ever after" story.

As I think we can gather from these two different descriptions of the same tale, true wisdom does not come from the appetites of the ego, but from the fruits of the spirit as those we were examining and harvesting the last couple of weeks from the letter to the Ephesians.

Divine discernment can only be divined when one is practicing the way of the Christ and living within the realm of God's kin-dom. If we are not treating others with kindness and gentleness we are not acting on God's guidance. If we do not practice self-control, extravagant hospitality and outrageous forgiveness we are not recipients of God's wisdom.

"If we refuse to redeem Solomon by revision, if we're willing to look at his life in its full complexity, we can hear warnings worth heeding," Ms. Thomas writes. "They're painful and pointed warnings, but they might save us."

As she sees it, these warnings may include the possibility of **losing God's dream in ours**. "Solomon may very well have received a vision from God; [but] in the end, it doesn't matter. What matters is that Solomon's own dreams very quickly left God's in the dust."

We have to keep checking in with God and looking deeply at the choices we have made and are making on a daily/hourly/moment-by-moment basis. Our ego is a crafty thing and is seeking for every scintilla of separation to promote its own agenda. Soon we're neglecting the very people and places God has called us to serve as we feed our own appetites and go where we want to go without any sense of God's wisdom going before us.

It's also possible to "**hog God**" Ms. Thomas purports. "Solomon believed that his wisdom and his legitimacy as Israel's ruler came from God himself. But how often, in the years that followed, did he return to that original mandate, and ask himself if his reign was still worthy of God's stamp of approval? Using God to legitimize one's own decisions and satisfy one's own lusts is dangerous, especially if it denies other people the right to appeal to God, too."

My ears always prick up when I hear people saying "God told me to...; or, even worse, God told me that YOU should..." Although I am a firm believer in God's leading, unless you are hearing a voice issuing forth from the clouds (and even then you should be rather suspicious of hidden amplifiers) we are all of us discerning God's guidance and wisdom through our own filters and our own understandings of God's Word and no human being can purport to be God's mouthpiece for oneself and most certainly not for everybody else. A true mark of wisdom is the ability to listen and to expand one's consciousness and to regularly accept one's fallibility before the greatness of our God.

One of my greatest spiritual guides throughout my childhood and on into young adulthood was my mother's father, the Rev. Milton Brackbill, whom I called, "Grandpa." Grandpa was a man of deep faith and strong convictions, steeped in the scriptures and in the precepts of the Mennonite church. However, when as an elderly man well in his 90's he discovered that I was gay, his response was, "well, I always thought that was wrong, but since this is Donnie, I guess I'll have to be giving it more thought." To me, Grandpa's ability to put person before principle and to have an openness to gain more insight and to seek God's leading on an issue that for decades he would have said he knew exactly how he felt about it is the true mark of wisdom and of one who truly understands that God is still speaking.

“Solomon, like his father before him, is a complex character,” writes Kathryn Schifferdecker, an Associate Professor at Luther Seminary. “...like our own leaders, [he’s] a mixture of good and bad. Solomon is, in other words, like us--all of us saints and sinners at the same time.

‘What would you wish for if you could wish for anything?’ Solomon, for all his shortcomings... answers well. He wishes not for personal gain or material possessions, but for a listening heart, [and] a discerning mind...”

Amen.