

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**20th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**August 15, 2021**  
**“Know What to Ask For” by Rev. Sue Trigger**

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14 (CEB)

Then David lay down with his ancestors and was buried in David’s City. He ruled over Israel forty years—seven years in Hebron and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his royal power was well established.

Now Solomon loved the LORD by walking in the laws of his father David, with the exception that he also sacrificed and burned incense at the shrines.

The king went to the great shrine at Gibeon in order to sacrifice there. He used to offer a thousand entirely burned offerings on that altar. The LORD appeared to Solomon at Gibeon in a dream at night. God said, “Ask whatever you wish, and I’ll give it to you.”

Solomon responded, “You showed so much kindness to your servant my father David when he walked before you in truth, righteousness, and with a heart true to you. You’ve kept this great loyalty and kindness for him and have now given him a son to sit on his throne. And now, LORD my God, you have made me, your servant, king in my father David’s place. But I’m young and inexperienced. I know next to nothing. But I’m here, your servant, in the middle of the people you have chosen, a large population that can’t be numbered or counted due to its vast size. Please give your servant a discerning mind in order to govern your people and to distinguish good from evil, because no one is able to govern this important people of yours without your help.”

It pleased the LORD that Solomon had made this request. God said to him, “Because you have asked for this instead of requesting long life, wealth, or victory over your enemies—asking for discernment so as to acquire good judgment— I will now do just what you said. Look, I hereby give you a wise and understanding mind. There has been no one like you before now, nor will there be anyone like you afterward. I now also give you what you didn’t ask for: wealth and fame. There won’t be a king like you as long as you live. And if you walk in my ways and obey my laws and commands, just as your father David did, then I will give you a very long life.”

This summer, Mitch and I have been preaching from the Old Testament Lectionary readings in I Kings. We looked at the different sides of David; the good and the bad. Last Sunday

Mitch looked at the impact of David's mistakes on his son Absalom who rebelled against his father and lost his life for it. Today's story turns the focus to his son Solomon.

At this point in the story, David has died and been buried with honor. Solomon has become king. While Absalom and his brother Adonijah rebelled against their father and tried to claim the throne; Solomon, the younger brother, watched all of this and choose a different path; one that led straight to the throne.

As David neared death, he turned the throne over to Solomon and encouraged him, "You are a wise man; you will know what to do." (I Kings 2:9) Solomon was wise and his legacy has lived on, not only in the book of Proverbs in the Bible; but even in our common language. You may have heard someone say, "You're as wise as Solomon", or "You have the wisdom of Solomon."

I have often wondered about wisdom. Is it something you are just blessed with or is it something learned? It may include both of those things, but Solomon shows us that wisdom is something more. Wisdom is a bit like a recipe; a cup of blessing, and a cup of fear in the Lord, a pinch of knowledge, and a few tablespoons of experience. Solomon's story also shows that wisdom is hard won and achieved in the heat of daily choices and compromises. For Solomon, wisdom grew as he was tidying up the messes left by his family. All of this on the way to making things better.

I want to be clear about what the fear of the Lord means. To have fear of the Lord is to be in awe of God, to respect and revere God's holiness. Solomon had a strong relationship with God. In verse 33 it says that Solomon loved the Lord. He practiced his faith in the ways that David taught him. When he was crowned as King, he went to make a sacrifice and offered incense – the fragrance of holiness, at all the high places.

These were lovely expressions of his faith, but the most important thing that happened in this story was when God appeared to Solomon one night in a dream. God spoke to Solomon saying, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon replied saying, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant and my father David because he walked before you in faithfulness. He goes on with lofty praise for God and his father and then said, "And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father, although I am only a child; I do not know

how to go out or come in. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” God was very pleased with this and promised to give Solomon a wise and discerning mind. God also promised that if Solomon was faithful, God would add to his life.

This is a story that tells us a lot about what wisdom looks like, and it reminds us an important truth that Israel’s wise teachers built their beliefs on. And that is that God is the beginning of all wisdom. In the Reformed Faith, we speak of God’s sovereignty. God is Lord and ruler over all creation. The theologian, Gerhard von Rad, wrote about why it is important to start with the sovereignty of God as the foundation of wisdom. Because “from this foundation grows awareness, with wide-awake common sense that God governs the world.”<sup>i</sup>

The question we struggle with in the Church is “How?” How does God govern the world? Some would say that everything that happens is God’s will. That opens the door to a lengthy conversation about why bad things happen to innocent people and what kind of God would do bad things to his children. Those are some of the most difficult questions people of faith wrestle with. From this viewpoint, people often feel like they have no control of their life, as if they have no responsibility for their actions. After all, God is in charge. I have known people who have lost a loved one in a terrible accident and lost their faith because they couldn’t believe in a God who could be so cruel.

I think Solomon can help us out here. Solomon understood the sovereignty of God, but he also understood that as God’s servant, he had responsibilities in this relationship too. He didn’t assume that God would take care of all the details of the kingdom for him. Instead, he asked the right questions. Will you help me to be wise and discerning? Will you help me to be the king you want me to be? Will you guide me? Solomon understood the covenant relationship with God meant living his life hand in hand with God.

It is likely that you know someone who believes that God is in control and so whenever anything happens, it is God’s will. As if God would desire that someone would get drunk and drive the wrong way down the interstate and kill a family with young children. Or that God would desire to punish us for our sinful behavior by burning down thousands of acres in California, or

an earthquake in Haiti. This kind of belief has caused people to leave the Church and some to have no faith in God at all.

There is another way of understanding God's sovereignty, and that is that God created this world according to a plan that invites us to share in the covenant relationship, to be responsible for all of creation, to seek to be faithful to God in our choices. From this perspective, God weeps over the person who drank until drunk and took the lives of a family, but it is the driver who is responsible. God does not send natural disasters to punish us, but when we refuse to be the stewards of creation God told us to be, we will experience the consequences. From this view, God's sovereignty looks more like the rudder that is guiding the ship; with each one of us part of the crew. We all bear responsibility for whether the ship is the Titanic.

That is why knowledge is so important for us. If we don't understand the effects of alcohol on our bodies, we can't help people overcome addiction and prevent more accidents. If we don't understand the sciences, we can't overcome the effects of climate change and viruses that are rapidly impacting the world.

Today as we bless our educators and students, we are affirming our belief that knowledge is an important part of our faith and our journey toward discernment of God's will for our world. Knowledge is an important ingredient of wisdom. A cup of blessing from God, a cup of awe and reverence for God, add the knowledge we are blessed with through education, and mix it with experience – those are the ingredients of wisdom.

I want to close with one last thought about the wisdom of Solomon. Solomon understood that the truly wise person is the one who thinks himself not wise. To think of oneself as wise is a sure sign of foolishness. There is plenty of foolishness in the world, may we all do our part to faithfully seek God's help as we discern what God wants and needs us to do to make the world God intends.

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<sup>i</sup> Gerhard von Rad, "God at Work in Israel, trans. John H. Marks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980) 181-182.