

The Wisdom of Wisdom

1 Kings 3:5-14

July 27, 2008

I.

Once upon a time a handsome young prince became king of a very powerful nation. And God asked what gift he could give to the young king as he began his reign. The young king asked for wisdom to rule righteously, and God was pleased. God gave him wisdom greater than anyone ever had or would have. In addition, God showed his favor by granting the young king riches and glory beyond that of any other king. And the young king lived happily ever after. The End.

Or was it? Listen to these words. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains for ever. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. Then I said to myself, 'What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?' And I said to myself that this also is vanity" (Ecc. 1:2-4, 2:11, 15).

Today's Old Testament reading pictures young Solomon as he ascended to the throne of Israel after the death of his father, David. And if we only listen to the part about how God granted Solomon's request for wisdom and gave him riches and glory, we might think that Solomon had it made. But, alas, it was not to be. Those expressions of gloom and despair I just read were Solomon's own words from the Book of Ecclesiastes, which he wrote at the end of his life.

So, what happened in between? How did a young king get off to such a great start and end up thinking life was vanity and meaningless? The short answer is that he forgot about God. He did not do what God asked him to do. And I will come back to this a little later.

II.

But first, some very brief background might be helpful. About 900 years before Solomon's time, God made a covenant with Abraham, who was the forefather of the Hebrew people. God said the Hebrews would become as numerous as the stars, and would be given the holy land as an everlasting possession (Ge. 12:1-3, 15:5, 17:8). God's promise was unconditional. The people would not have to do anything in return, other than go take the land.

Then, about 500 years before Solomon's time, as Moses was leading those multitudes out of bondage in Egypt into the promised land, God made a covenant with Moses. This covenant was based upon the laws that God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai, and this time God's promise was conditional. God said that if the people obeyed the law they would prosper and be blessed, but if they were disobedient they would be cursed and scattered among the nations (Deut. 28).

So, if they did not obey, the land still would be theirs but they might no longer live in it. It would be like when my father took my car keys away. I still owned the car but could not drive it.

For the next few centuries the Hebrew tribes occupied the land, and began to worship local gods contrary to God's covenant with Moses. God punished them by raising up military forces against them. And they repented and were restored, but then they did it all over again. Thus began a cycle of disobedience, oppression, and deliverance. God was patient, and did not drive them from the land. But the people grew weary of being insecure, and did not trust God to protect them. This led to the creation of the monarchy and the beginning of the Kings of Israel.

About 1000 BC, Solomon's father, David, became king of the region in the south called Judah, and within three years had united the northern and southern territories into a single powerful nation called Israel. Israel continued as a dominant force in the region throughout David's life

and the life of Solomon. During this time Israel prospered beyond anyone's expectations. To this day, movies are made about King Solomon's gold.

Then, Solomon eventually died and everything fell apart. To make a long story short, a civil war divided the once powerful nation into two second-rate countries, north and south. The northern country kept the name of Israel, and the southern country took back the old name of Judah. Scripture tells us that over the succeeding centuries, all of the kings of Israel in the north did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and most of the kings of Judah in the south did the same.

Both nations eventually were defeated by pagan neighbors, the great temple was destroyed, Jerusalem was reduced to rubble, and most of the people went into exile. Everything was gone. The national catastrophe was complete. Ten of the original twelve tribes were lost forever, and except for a brief period between the Old and New Testaments, the Jewish people had no country until the modern state of Israel was formed in 1948. God's judgment had come to pass.

And the final stage of this disaster began on Solomon's watch. A graph of the rise and fall of Israel might look like an upside down "V." The final upward movement to the peak of glory would represent the first half of Solomon's reign, and the beginning of the downward movement to eventual destruction would describe the last half of his rule.

III.

So let's review this reading, and some other parts of the story. When Solomon became king, God asked what he could do for him. God's appearance in this way was not especially unusual. The Old Testament has many examples of God's interaction with the Hebrew people. Now, of course, God relates to people through the Holy Spirit.

And Solomon could have asked for worldly things. Instead he asked God to give him wisdom to govern the people. God was pleased with this response and granted it, and even granted things that Solomon did not request. God gave Solomon riches and honor, and also said that if Solomon would keep God's statutes and commandments, he would lengthen Solomon's life.

For about twenty years Solomon did well. He was obedient, Israel prospered, and Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem as the center of worship. Then God again spoke to Solomon as he took the temple as his earthly dwelling. But this time presented Solomon with a big "if." He said that if Solomon did not keep God's commands and decrees, he would cut off Israel from the land and reject the temple (1 Ki. 9:7). This reaffirmed God's covenant with Moses.

It was not long before God became displeased because Solomon had taken 700 wives and 300 concubines, many of whom were not Jews. And he not only set up shrines so they could worship their own pagan gods, but also joined them in their idolatry (1 Ki. 11:3-8).

So God appeared to Solomon a third time, this time with bad news. God said "since you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, I will tear the kingdom away from you. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son" (1 Ki. 11-12). The rest is history. Within about 350 years the nation was completely gone and the people were in exile.

And Solomon had several years to think about God's displeasure before he died at about age sixty (1 Ki. 11:42). God did not lengthen Solomon's life, and this was the setting for his words of despair in the Book of Ecclesiastes we heard at the beginning of this sermon.

IV.

What does this story mean for us today? Well, I'm not going to preach about worldly wisdom. And by worldly wisdom I mean the insight and understanding that comes from experience, or

hard knocks, or sage advice given by our elders. Even atheists can have that kind of wisdom. And many of you have children or grandchildren, and have been to the big city and seen the tall buildings, so to speak. You already appreciate the importance of learning from the lessons of life.

I do, however want to speak of Godly wisdom, which is both similar and different. It is similar because we exercise it in the world just like the other kind. But it is different because it comes from God and not the world.

Let's start this way. What if God appeared to you and said he would grant you one wish? What would it be? Would you wish for money, possessions, power, or things for yourself? Or instead would you wish for world peace, a cure for cancer, an end to poverty, or things that would serve society?

Perhaps, being Episcopalians who at times value the middle way, we might try to do both. We might ask for something to help ourselves and the world. In a way, that's what Solomon did. He asked God to help him solve a problem. He asked God for the ability to govern his people. And Solomon was blessed, for a while, because he did what was good and right. In the first part of his rule as King of Israel he trusted in God. He honored God and God honored him. But in the end, he turned away from God with disastrous consequences.

This is the teaching of today's lesson as understood in the larger context of the history of Israel. God is generous, and merciful, and will provide for us. It's OK to wish for things for ourselves. But it is not a one way street. God expects something in return. We want us to be obedient to his will for us. He wants us to seek his wisdom just as Solomon did so many centuries ago.

But exercising God's wisdom and his will for us is not always easy. At times it does not come naturally because it can go against the ways of the world. When we do things God's way, we can be called to put things at the top of our lists that, in ordinary circumstances, might be closer to the bottom.

We know God works in the world today through the Holy Spirit. Through the presence of Spirit we discern God's will for us, and through the power of the Spirit we do God's will. Sometimes we receive guidance and wisdom through prayer. Sometimes it seems to come as an inspiration. And sometimes it does not come at all. Perhaps in those cases we are not seeking God's agenda for us, but rather God's approval of our own agendas.

But nothing really has changed in three thousand years. From God's covenant with Moses to the New Covenant given by Jesus Christ, a common thread runs through the relationship between God and his people. It is that when we are obedient he will provide. When we try to do what God wants us to do he will, through his grace, give us the gifts that we need.

V.

I said earlier that some things do not come naturally, especially in a society that emphasizes taking care of number one. But we are called to make God number one. We are number two. And when you think about it, that's a pretty good arrangement. I would rather have God's perfect will as my priority than try to place my own imperfect will above him. How far do you think I would get doing that?

The bottom line is that if we have faith, then we believe in the promises of Scripture. And if we believe in those promises we will seek God's wisdom to guide us through life. God was pleased with Solomon's choice at first. We are called to make that same choice. And it may be that no one will ever make movies about our wealth, but we can be sure that God's blessings will be with us. *Amen.*