

WALKING IN WISDOM

Sermon preached by Rev. Edee Fenimore

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Ephesians 5: 15-20, 1 Kings 3:3-14

A few weeks ago a member of the congregation asked me why I had not preached on a lesson from the New Testament. I'm sure I muttered something about it being a coincidence that the lectionary readings that week happened to be from the Old Testament. But I will confess to you now that that is often the case. I frequently find myself drawn to the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we refer to as the Old Testament because the characters, the people described, are so like us. They stumble and fall in their walks of faith. They make choices that are so bad that I find myself behaving as I do when I watch a scary movie and the music signals not at all subtly that something dreadful is about to happen. I want to yell, "Don't do that, don't go there, don't say that." But of course the movie characters, like the people described in the Hebrew Scriptures do say that, go there, and do that. These people from the Hebrew Scriptures, like us, make mistake after mistake bumbling along as they try to be faithful to the life that God calls them to lead.

But another reason that I find myself drawn to these people is that I can be surprised by what I discover. I don't know as much about them, as I do about Jesus and his disciples, Paul, Peter and so on. I get Samuel, Saul, and Solomon mixed up. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that I get the stories about these three leaders mixed up. I do know that Samuel came first and that he was a judge over Israel. And I know that Samuel anointed Saul to be king over Israel and that Saul was the king that preceded David. I also know that Solomon was David's son and became king over Israel after the death of David. But the various stories of intrigue and faithlessness, the stories of walking with God and turning away from God, those stories get all mixed up in my mind. Probably the only story that comes to mind when Solomon's name is mentioned is the story that follows our lesson from this morning. That is the story that gives us the expression the wisdom of Solomon.

You probably remember it well. Two women, came to Solomon, each claiming that a child, a son, belongs to her. Each woman claims that while they were in the same house, each having just given birth, while everyone slept, the son of the other woman died and the distraught mother placed the dead baby at the breast of the other woman. When that woman awoke she saw that the baby was dead but in a

moment she recognized that this was not her child but that the other woman was nursing her child. Solomon showing the wisdom for which he is known, dramatically calls for a sword and says, "Divide the living boy in half and give half to one and half to the other." Of course, the mother who in fact gave birth to the child says, "No, give the child to her. Do not kill him." I noted when reviewing this story that the other woman said to her rival, "It shall be neither mine nor yours". Then she turned to Solomon and said, "Divide it." Solomon recognizes immediately that the mother of the child would be the one willing to give him up in order to save his life.

That story is indeed the quintessential description of the wisdom of Solomon. But our lesson not only delineates how Solomon got this amazing wisdom but it also describes Solomon as less than perfect in many other ways. Let's listen to the way the passage begins; "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense in the high places". O.K. we probably do not hear this in the same way as the original hearers. What is going on here is the speaker is saying Solomon was good and he was bad, he was right and he was wrong, in other words Solomon was a human being like us, with all the unevenness, the inconsistencies, the flaws that make us exasperating and interesting. Solomon walked in the statutes of his father David, meaning he tried to follow Yahweh's way, he tried to live out the law of God, loving God and neighbor. Only he sacrificed and offered incense in the high places. Anytime high places are mentioned we should hear in our minds the words "worshipping idols." Maybe Solomon was hedging his bets by worshipping idols. Maybe he couldn't let go of the old ways. It is even possible that this was a carefully thought out balance that he thought was essential to his walk of faith.

Whatever Solomon's reasons, the teller of this story and then the recorder make it clear that when one is a follower of Yahweh then the sacrificing to and worship of other gods cannot be a part of one's life. The first commandment, the basis of all the law of God is, after all, God saying, "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." So for Solomon to follow in the statutes of his father David, to be God's person means that he cannot worship other gods. But he does. In fact our lesson says, "Solomon, 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." So Solomon not only worships gods other than Yahweh but he goes to the primary site of such worship and he makes an extraordinary sacrifice, probably more than anyone else could make. He is sort of letting everyone know that he is worshipping the gods.

Now as this incident was told throughout the land, the original hearers would be expecting that the god who was being neglected, in this case Yahweh, would be

offended and would turn away from the one doing the sacrificing to other gods. But what happens in our lesson is quite different from what would have been expected. There is no abandonment by God. In fact there is just the opposite. Listen to what the next few verses say. “At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, ‘Ask what I should give you.’” So God, the creator of the universe is described as meeting Solomon where Solomon is, going to the primary place for the worship of idols, because that is where Solomon is. That is an extremely important lesson for God’s people then and now. It describes an aspect of God’s nature that we can hardly believe. God does not leave us when we turn away from God. God continues to woo us, to love us, to call us into a relationship. The good news of God’s love is that even when we turn away, God does not desert us. In fact God’s love is, if anything more apparent, more generous. The extravagant love of God cannot be thwarted. In one way or another God says to us, as God says to Solomon, “Ask what I should give you.”

Back to our lesson - Solomon’s response to this extravagant offer God makes in the dream is to recognize his own shortcomings. Hear again the words of Solomon to God, after praising his father David, “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.” That is the equivalent of saying, “I am wet behind the ears and I don’t know enough to come in out of the rain.” Perhaps it is also Solomon’s confession that he knows his worship of other gods is the wrong thing for God’s person to be doing.

Then Solomon makes a request, in response to God’s amazing offer. It is this request that determines where Solomon is choosing to live out his walk of faith. Solomon says, “Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.” God asks what Solomon wants and Solomon asks for wisdom. He is saying that alone he will not be capable of ruling well. Solomon knows that he is a flawed human being who needs the wisdom that comes with walking with God.

God’s response drives home the point. The words from our lesson are, “And God said to Solomon, ‘Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I do now according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.’” Solomon’s wisdom comes from God. It is given as a gift... a gift that Solomon knew he needed.

Centuries later Paul in writing to the church at Ephesus sums it all up. “Be careful then, how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time. So do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is.” May it be so for us today. May we find God’s wisdom by seeking it as we walk with God.

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