

I Kings 3:3-14 The End of Wisdom
Psalm 111, Ephesians 5:15-20
August 15, 2021

For the past several weeks the lectionary has been leading us on a journey through the very provocative 6th chapter of the Gospel of John, as well as through Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. Our selections for reading sometimes skip over one or the other of these journeys either to avoid redundancy or to give some space to the trajectory of the Old Testament readings. Such is the case today.

We have left off the text from John. Jesus is still arguing with some of his followers about the nature of his person, and he is insisting that he is "The Bread of Life" and that his body must be eaten in order for a person to be saved. Of course he interprets this spiritually and not literally, which itself is problematic.

But the readings from the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, have also been journeying, in this case, through the stories of 2 Samuel and into 1 Kings. 2 Samuel chronicles the kingship of the great Israelite King David. Right at the beginning of 1 Kings, David dies, and the 2 books of Kings present the administrations of his descendants, beginning, of course, with Solomon. According to our reading today, Solomon got off to a good start.

He respects his father's character and heritage, recognizing his own limitations and shortcomings, and prays for a discerning heart in order to be able to

distinguish wrong from right. On the positive side, there is a train of thought throughout the scriptures that associates Solomon with wisdom, and here we see it presented for the first time.

God is presented as being impressed with Solomon's prayer and so gives him a long life and wealth, and honor, all added to the power he has inherited. Then it is revealed to have been a dream, which is ironic, because in addition to the train of thought that lionizes Solomon as a king like no other, there is also a strand of thought that criticizes him sharply as a man satiated with wealth and power, corrupted by both, leading to the wreck and ruin of the kingdom. Solomon was a disaster for his people.

It is very interesting that though Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem and expanded the kingdom to its farthest reach and attained more wealth and power, David is considered Israel's greatest and most iconic king, even with *his* failures.

It is good for us to remember that the bulk of the Hebrew Bible was written in the time of, and shortly after, the Babylonian crisis, when Israel was conquered, exiled, and destroyed, and when later some of them were able to return and attempt to rebuild and restore their nation. It was a convulsive and traumatic set of events when they could accurately say, "these are hard times."

While everyday life for many of them was assuredly more tolerable than this crisis makes it sound, the

former Israelite and Judean people have continued to live under the sadness of the decline and fall of their civilization, a sadness that becomes an indelible part of the biblical message.

It is also good for us to remember that part of the reason these writings are sacred and relevant to modern readers is because the story they tell is not simply the story of one little ancient monarchy 2,500 years ago, but they tell the story of humanity. Their story is ours, the same kind of things happen in both. Both they and we aspire to a higher life, and we fail, and fall upon hard times, and search for joy and meaning, and in this case, wisdom.

It was a good start Solomon made, even though his life concluded with a kind of same-old same-old litany of failures. Perhaps it would also do for us to be realistic about the possibilities, for ourselves and for others, because the story of Solomon's failures parallel the stories of countless others. There doesn't seem to be a way for any people to negotiate the hazards of life without mistakes, big failures that sometimes turn into catastrophic disasters.

The 131st Psalm begins, "my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high, and I do not occupy myself with things too great and marvelous for me." Solomon's question reveals a similar sentiment, "So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong, "he prayed, and then, "for who is able to govern this

great people of yours?" It is a rhetorical question that demands a negative answer.

Solomon got off to a pretty good start, but then he lifted up his heart and raised his eyes too high, occupied himself with things too great and marvelous . . . answered his own rhetorical question with the conclusion that he was indeed up to the task of power. He lost the capacity of humility, and he, in the end, failed to trust God instead of himself.

We are not in Solomon's shoes, but in each of our lives we face similar questions, the fate of the world may not stand on our decisions, but there is still a price to pay when humility is set aside, and replaced with selfish concerns.

All journeys end either because the pilgrims turn aside, or back; or because they reach their destination. The question is always before us whether the search for joy and meaning, or in this case, wisdom, will end because we turn back, or because it keeps working in us until it reaches its end in us.

The gospel news requires us to mention the ultimate presentation of divine wisdom, God's discerning heart, that we find in the Cross of Christ, the foolishness of God, wiser than human wisdom. And let us not be too hard on ourselves, or anyone else, on Solomon, because human beings never have had the solution, but think about that cross, remember it is God on display, the end of wisdom . . .

[Back](#)[Home](#)