“SOLOMON: Give Me an Understanding Mind”
(to govern your people)

by
Rev. Dr. Paul A. Lance, Pastor
Seaside Community Church (United Church of Christ)
22940 Ocean Avenue, Torrance, California 90505
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Gibeon, not Jerusalem, was the principal high place in Israel in Solomon’s day. Until the Temple was built toward the end of his life, Solomon brought his offerings and sacrifices (by the thousands) to Gibeon, the sanctuary for the Royal family. It was at Gibeon that King Solomon had his famous dream (as Diane Siegfried read for us). When God asked the new king what he most wanted, Solomon asked not for wealth, nor for a long life, but for understanding so that he might govern God’s people wisely and well. As it turned out (according to the author of the Book of the Kings), God was so pleased with this answer that Solomon received the other things as well!

Before we focus on Solomon’s wisdom, there are several things in that dream conversation that deserve comment. First, to notice that it is a dream!

While we are accustomed to thinking of God, or The Lord, as a character in these Bible stories, let’s not take them too literally. Nearly all of God’s “appearances” to the Hebrew patriarchs, prophets, and other holy men and women were in “visions” in the night… or as we would say, in our dreams.

The Book of Job, whose encounter with God’s Awesome Power (in Chapters 38-41) is perhaps the most visual and all-encompassing experience of the Lord God in the whole Old Testament, is up-front about how God communicates with human beings (Chapter 33:14-16): “For God speaks in
one way... *In a dream, in a vision in the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens their ears.*

Visions and dreams take place during the silent hours of the night simply because it is then that the mind is idling -- in “neutral” rather than in gear -- unconstrained by rules of logic and linear sequential time. It is when we are asleep that new patterns and possibilities emerge as our sense perceptions and memories sort themselves in an “intuitive” rather than “intentional” way. God “opens our ears” because our minds are at rest when we are asleep. God “speaks” not as a man or woman of flesh and blood, but as a spiritual image.

When the Lord God appears to sleeping Solomon like the big blue genie from Aladdin’s lamp, and asks Solomon “What should I give you?”, Solomon begins by lifting up those parts of David’s story that are most inspiring: “Your servant, my father David, walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you, God.” He does not speak of David’s outlaw years, violence, and treachery; nor David’s love of Saul’s son Jonathan more than Saul’s daughter (who had been given to David to be his wife); nor of the adulterous affair David had with Bathsheba, Solomon’s mother, and the murder of Uriah the Hittite (who would have been Solomon’s father). No… none of David’s shadow side, his corruption & infamy, is in Solomon’s mind.

“My father David, walked before you, God, in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart.” Solomon had only the highest opinion of his father, and those three traits would serve any of us well. Faithfulness (you can count on me), righteousness (to do what is right, not counting the cost), and “uprightness of heart” which I would call personal integrity, one’s honor.

Solomon also spoke of God’s traits in his reply in the dream: “You have shown great and steadfast love… and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love.” Solomon focused on a single theme: God’s LOVE. God’s great and steadfast love. Through the 40 years of David’s Monarchy, despite
all the failings and reversals of fortune, God never turned away from David. That’s the kind of God Solomon knew, and it’s the kind of God I would hope would meet you in your dreams, too. Not a judging, vengeful, **angry God**, but one of great and steadfast **love**. Period! Even if we don’t **deserve** such a God, **that’s the way God is** (according to my Bible)... and Jesus makes that clear.

Solomon then refers to himself.

“You have given my father a son (me!), to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant (me!) 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.” Only a little child... who does not know how to go out or come in.

Last Sunday, as we considered how **Jesus welcomed the little children** and invited them to come to him -- and said: “To such as these the kingdom of God belongs!” -- we admitted that our society does not **expect much** from **little children**. They are too little, too young, too innocent, too expressive, too vulnerable, in fact **of little account** until they get **old enough** to be “useful.”

That’s the way Solomon feels, this night in Gibeon, as the mantle of royal responsibility falls on his young shoulders. Ordinarily, the eldest son would be the Crown Prince, not the youngest son. David’s first-born, Prince **Absolom, would have been king**, not Solomon, if Absolom had not rebelled against his father and tried to **take** the throne in a popular uprising (a **coup**). **Absolom** had been killed.

The second son, **Adonijah**, Solomon’s half-brother, was next in line as the “rightful heir” to David’s throne. However, **Solomon’s mother** Bathsheba advocated for **her baby** Solomon. When Adonijah asked to marry **David’s wife Abishag** (a young girl who joined David’s harem “to keep him warm” late in life), Bathsheba protested. Wives were the property of their husband. If **Abishag** were given to **David’s son Adonijah**, it would mean that
David was as good as dead, and the harem was being “passed on” to the new king.

David had hundreds of wives and concubines by this time, so the desire of Prince Adonijah to take David’s youngest and prettiest new wife as his own may have been seen as a “natural progression” in the peculiar “marriage patterns” we find in the Old Testament. But Bathsheba interprets Adonijah’s attempt to sleep with Abishag as yet another “coup” attempt against David, and portrays him as a traitor. He wasn’t her son, after all. Adonijah’s mother was one of David’s other wives. Bathsheba then asks that David immediately crown her son Solomon as the next King of Israel, lest Adonijah’s supporters come to his defense. All Jerusalem was taken by surprise that David chose his youngest son, Solomon, to succeed him instead of any of his older brothers.

It seems that young Solomon was just as surprised to be the new king! “You have made me (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.”

When we watched the miniseries “John Adams,” there was a scene in which Adams (the former Massachusetts farmer & patriot lawyer) has been assigned as America’s first ambassador to London, immediately following the Revolutionary War. England is not happy with the bumpkins who defeated their Royal Army! John Adams is instructed about how to approach King George III – bowing upon entering the room, bowing again more deeply when halfway to the throne, a third time when facing the King, all the while averting his eyes, & he is not to speak until spoken to…a very uncomfortable protocol.

That may be what Solomon is worried about when he says: “I do not know how to go out or come in.” Clearly the young man felt overwhelmed by his weighty responsibilities. He has been placed at the top of the social hierarchy at a young age. People will ask him to make decisions that have wide-spread implications. His every word is taken as a directive, as an order! (I think President Obama discovered last month, when he said the police acted “stupidly” when arresting that professor in his own home, that
Solomon says of the nation he will rule, that they are: “people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.” God’s Chosen People, as numerous as the stars in the sky... Those words remind us of the covenants God made to Abraham & Isaac & to Moses. Solomon knows those old stories so well that they influence his dreams! Solo-mon, in his youth, enjoys an intimate relationship with the God of the Bible.

That is my prayer for our children & youth here at Seaside, especially for our Confirmands, that they know the stories of the Bible, especially those of Jesus, so well as to be able “dream themselves in” to those hopes & promises.

Solomon’s success in being selected to fill the highest post in the land gave him “pause” rather than exultation. Since his father, David, had been Israel’s greatest king, there’s a lot for the young man to live up to!

“Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind,” he says to God in his dream, “to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.”

Apparently that one needful thing, an understanding mind able to discern between good and evil, was just what God wanted to give the young king. “Indeed,” says God, “I give you a wise and discerning mind. No one like you has ever been before you, and no one like you shall arise after you. … No other king shall compare with you.” What an extravagant claim! What generosity from God to do not only what Solomon asked, but to do it with such exceeding excellence that riches and honor would follow, all his life.

Words such as these fit well into a young man’s dreams. The specialness he feels about himself, the incomparable glory and grandeur his reign will accrue, the Golden Age of peace that his realm will enjoy, fit the idealism
of a young man’s dreams. Unfortunately, it doesn’t reflect the reality of history, as narrated in the Bible!

A number of Solomon’s enemies had to be eliminated to establish Solomon’s grip on the monarchy -- including his other brothers, who might otherwise have had claim to the throne! The Chronicles of the Kings tell a ruthless and bloody story of coercion, violence, infidelity, and other sins. Solomon’s own reflections late in life, musings captured in the Book of Ecclesiastes, display a depressed and disillusioned monarch, who, despite all the wisdom and achievements of his Golden Era, found life “empty.” Vanity, vanity, all is in vain; a chasing after the wind, with nothing new under the sun.

Solomon found that he loved power more than he loved his people, and he loved foreign women more than he loved the Lord God. Chapter 11 verse 4 tells us that “when Solomon was old, his wives (plural…He had 400 of them!) turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David.” Solomon imported foreign religious symbols into the design of the Jerusalem Temple, went about building it with conscripted (forced) labor, at the cost of enormous taxation on the people, such that upon his death, David’s former kingdom disintegrated as the northern ten Hebrew tribes seceded from Judah and set up their own Kingdom of Israel with its Capitol City “Samaria.” Solomon failed in the end.

But today, in his dream as a young man just getting started, Solomon has an intimate relationship with the Lord God. He wants to have (and it is a fine goal to pursue) an understanding mind that is able to discern between good and evil in order to govern the people under his control wisely and well.

God grants the request… with a caveat: “If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.” At that point, Solomon awoke and realized it had been a dream. He returned from his Camp-David-like retreat at Gibeon to Jerusalem, where he stood before the Ark of the Covenant, offered up burnt sacrifices and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.
Almost immediately, the young king’s decision-making powers (wisdom) were put to the test, and it is perhaps the most famous event in his life (apart from building the Temple). Two mothers came to Solomon, each claiming the same newborn child as her own. Apparently one baby had died at birth, and one baby had survived. Now, both of the distraught women claimed the living baby as hers. How is Solomon going to settle this dispute? (I Kings 3)

You know the story: Solomon calls for a sword, with which he is going to cut the baby in half! One woman says “Go ahead, it’s only fair”, but the other protests: “Oh, no! God forbid! Give the child to her, don’t let it die!” At that moment, Solomon realizes that the one with pity (the pro-life mother) is the right one to raise the child, for she cares for its well-being over her own.

Preachers over the centuries see in Solomon’s solution a cleverness and subtle reverse-psychology at work. They assume he would not have used the sword, except to ferret out the true sentiments of the two women, as it turned out. “You see how wise he was,” they conclude. I tend to see in his action the callous indifference to life that Solomon showed in so many other situations, where he actually used the sword to silence his opponents, attack neighboring kingdoms, eliminate his rivals, threaten & coerce his subjects to do his bidding. If that one bold woman did not interrupt the king (as she did), like the angel that interrupted Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac, each one of them would have gone home with half-a-baby to bury! We’re lucky it worked out better.

Under Solomon’s administration, the Jewish Kingdom expanded its borders to Damascus, Syria, in the North and to Egypt in the South. Much of the Lebanese seacoast and the trans-Jordan territory came under Solomon’s Empire. Ultimately Israel became a peaceful realm, as Solomon entered into marriage-treaties with all his neighboring war-lords and kinglets, and as he accrued the largest standing Army (and cavalry with thousands of chariots) in the Middle East. No one messed with King Solomon, the richest & strongest ruler in that era! Having achieved peace through strength, Solomon was able
to put energy and attention toward building the Jerusalem Temple for which he is famous. No one in Israel would ever say a bad word about Solomon!

His wisdom has come down to us primarily in *the Book of Proverbs*, as we read them this morning. Their appeal lies *first* in their *brevity* – most are only one or two lines long, much like bumper stickers & advertising slogans today – and second in their *wit*. There is no *plot* to the Book; no *rhyme or reason* for the arrangement of the sayings. It doesn’t start at the beginning of a topic, and then logically and orderly move toward a conclusion. Quite often *no connection at all* exists between one verse and its neighboring verses! It’s like reading *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, or a notebook of quotations.

We’ll look at some Proverbs more deeply next Sunday, but for today, and for Solomon’s sake, I wanted to lift up just a few of the ones we read…

22:1 “*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.*” Solomon knew what it meant to have a *name* to live up to – King David had set a high standard! He wanted his name to be held in high “favor” when his term in office was through. *Money & power would be no substitute* for the reputation of faithfulness, righteousness, and integrity that David’s “family name” had bestowed on the young king. I wonder *how important* a good name, a good reputation, is to our young people?

22:2 “*The rich & the poor have this in common: the Lord is the Maker of them all.*” What we have in common with other people far outweighs what separates us. When we recognize that God is our Creator (in whatever name you think of God), *we are joined as in One great family*: sisters and brothers. As in our Pledge of Allegiance: we are all “one nation under God indivisible.”

22:6 One of the more famous proverbs: “*Train a child in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.*” We must impress our *stories* and *values* on our children *while they are still young*, if we want their dreams to continue to include them as they mature. We promise one another in our baptismal vows to raise our children “in the nurture and admonition of the
Lord.” Let’s take those vows seriously, and encourage our children & youth to be God’s!

Finally, 22:9 & 22: “Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor… Do not rob the poor because they are poor, nor crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause…” Now, I don’t expect any of us to relish robbing the poor, nor burdening the afflicted, but it is a great reminder that the Lord God pleads their cause.

God pays attention to how we treat the most vulnerable ones in our midst. God “takes sides” with the afflicted and the poor, and blesses those who are generous and those who share what they have.

These are wise words, if you ask me. These are patterns for living that will help us walk “in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart” toward God.

I commend to your reading the provocative phrases and challenging concepts of the Book of Proverbs. It is summer light reading, time well spent. Like Solomon, may God give us “an understanding mind” able to discern.