

Sunday 20B 2009

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 16, 2009

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

If God told you he would grant you one wish, what would you ask for? Or for that matter, if a genie from a lamp told you that he would grant you one wish, what would you ask for? It's a dangerous question, isn't it? King Midas asked that everything he touched would turn to gold. And he soon regretted that wish. Perhaps Solomon had heard of King Midas. Or perhaps Solomon had watched the episode of *The Simpsons* in which Lisa Simpson wished for peace on earth, and so all wars stopped, and all the weapons were destroyed, and space aliens took over planet earth. For whatever reason, Solomon asked for wisdom. And God thought that was indeed a very good request. And so God gave Solomon wisdom.

Now there are several ways in which we hear about Solomon's wisdom. Right after today's story, there follows a story of two women arguing about an infant. And Solomon threatens to cut the child in half, and the true mother reveals herself because she says, "No, let the other woman have the baby," rather than letting any harm come to it. This event cements Solomon's reputation as a wise judge.

There are at least two biblical books of wisdom that are said to have been written by Solomon. One is the book of Proverbs. And the other is the deuterocanonical book Wisdom of Solomon, which may not be in your home Bible because of its disputed status. And Solomon is also said to be the author of Ecclesiastes, which is a melancholy book of the Bible; and of the love poetry that we call the Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon. So the flow of our Old Testament readings over the next week goes like this: next Sunday Solomon builds the temple. The following Sunday, August 30, we get a small piece of Song of Solomon. And then starting on Labor Day weekend, for a sequence of three weeks, we have excerpts from Proverbs.

And that's all we'll ever hear about Solomon in Sunday worship— and in most churches you won't even get that much— unless someone like me tells you the rest of the story of Solomon.

Judaism and Christianity glorify David. Human history glorifies Solomon. Solomon is spoken of *outside* of the Bible. His abilities are known to history. David was good-looking, and passionate, and skillful with war, and skillful with music. He was troubled, though, and disorganized and kind of *ad hoc* in a lot of his decisions and actions. If you were a Hollywood producer, and you were casting for the role of David, you might choose James Dean or Johnny Depp or Bruce Willis. But Solomon was shrewd and very systematic. So you might choose to

cast Gene Hackman, or Tommy Lee Jones, or Michael Douglas in that role.

Solomon created international alliances, and that is how he became known to world history. Our first reading today skips over verses that describe how Solomon married the daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh, thus securing making it impossible for Egypt and Israel to go to war. And he had many wives. And many treaties. Now this aspect of his life made Solomon look the other way when foreign religions were being practiced in Israel. Some of his wives and mistresses practiced foreign religions. And for this reason, the Bible casts a shadow over Solomon, and Judaism and Christianity favor David, because our Bibles tell us that God favored David.

But if you were an ordinary farmer or trader you probably were better off with Solomon. He kept the peace. He brought enormous prosperity. How many of you would like to have a flat-rate tax? Well, that's what Solomon used. A ten percent flat-rate tax. And that gave his kingdom everything it needed to build good public works, to maintain an army, and to build international relations. George Frederick Handel wrote an entire oratorio called "Solomon." And the most famous piece in that Oratorio is something called the *Entrance of the Queen of Sheba*. It's based on the biblical story, of this grand visit by foreign princess, and how she was impressed by Solomon's kingdom, and they exchanged royal gifts.

Martin Luther lived in a time when the Christian Middle Ages were coming unraveled, and the Ottoman Empire— the Muslims in Turkey— were at the height of their power. Luther famously said that he would rather live under the leadership of a good Muslim than under the leadership of an incompetent Christian. And so it was with Solomon. Who may not have been spiritually pure, but who had the leadership qualities that bring peace and prosperity.

The reign of David and Solomon is what scholars call the time of the United Monarchy. Because all the tribes of Israel were united into one kingdom for the only time. After Solomon's death, his two sons would fight for control, and would split the kingdom into the northern part and the southern part, into what would become known as Israel and Judah.

Solomon was wise. Christianity teaches a spiritual wisdom, the wisdom that Paul called the wisdom of the cross. That is the wisdom of a life of sacrificial love. Paul put that kind of lifestyle in opposition to the decaying Greek philosophies, which peddled secret wisdoms like tomatoes in a farmer's market.

The Old Testament concept of wisdom— which means good judgment— is overlooked by most Christians and by most of our culture. The Old Testament kind of wisdom usually comes through age and experience. And our culture disdains age and experience. One of the ways I can gauge our culture's shallowness is that not only do we fail to speak of wisdom. We fail to speak of its opposite, which is folly. The fool. In the African-American community, the word "fool" is still used, and I think that is because of the African American church, and how it is deeply steeped in the Bible. Because the wisdom of Solomon— Proverbs and those other books— talk about fools. A fool is a person who does not ever understand what it is in his or her own best

interest. They have bad judgment. White people don't use that word anymore. I guess we figure none of us are fools.

Solomon's kind of wisdom is underrated. Underrated by Christians, underrated by atheists, and very underrated by our culture. It's the ability to size up people and situations. It's the ability to bring a lifetime of experience and knowledge to bear in the present moment. It's the ability to see motives, and to see opportunities, and to see risks, where other people only see the surface of things. And the great thing about wisdom, according to the Old Testament, is that if you don't have it, you can get it. The problem is, fools don't even know that they lack it.

Of all the people in the Old Testament, Solomon is the one who most known to history (outside of the Bible). He could have asked God for money. But money probably would have led to more conflict and violence. The same would have happened if Solomon asked for power. But Solomon instead asked for wisdom. And with wisdom it is easy to obtain wealth and influence. God grant us wisdom. Or at least grant us the wisdom to seek wisdom. Amen.