

PENTECOST 21 - GOD'S REFORMATION (1 Kings 3:4-28)

King Solomon was a product of the scandalous liaison between King David and Uriah's wife Bathsheba. It is a succession marked by court intrigue and competition between rival factions. The troubles or curse that beset David's house, following the taking of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, follow him to his deathbed. With David's oldest sons dead, next in line is Adonijah, his fourth son. His first son with Bathsheba died as an infant. David had Absalom killed when he attempted to usurp the throne. With a coup led in part by the prophet Nathan and with Bathsheba's help, they convinced David, who was dying to declare Solomon, Bathsheba's second son, king.

After all the intrigue, Solomon ascends the throne of his father. Finally he is king. And he goes to Gibeon to offer sacrifices to the Lord. After stating his love of the Lord, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places which were originally Canaanite sanctuaries, now used by Israelites to worship their God. The worship of Baal and other Canaanite deities was never totally forgotten. So a dark cloud already hangs over Solomon's actions.

Gibeon was recognized as the chief sanctuary in Israel, the temple had not yet been built in Jerusalem. Solomon's sacrificial rites at Gibeon were lavish. While he was there, the Lord appeared to him in a dream. Appearances of a deity at a sanctuary and in dreams or nightly visions were not uncommon throughout the ancient near east.

In his dream, Solomon is given a choice of anything he wants from God. “Ask me, what would you like me to give you?” The divine question is particularly meaningful when considering the circumstances regarding the royal succession from his father David. God’s question presents an opportunity that would soothe, comfort and assure a young king. God offers to give anything to Solomon to help secure his reign with an honest, “What do you want?”

Solomon could request: long life, riches, power, revenge, and victory in battle. While it may seem that God is offering Solomon a blank cheque, it seems to be more of a test of Solomon’s fitness for kingship. How will Solomon answer? Solomon starts by praising God for God’s faithfulness to his father David, and he describes his own situation. He is a young man. Calling himself a “little child” is simply a way of expressing humility. He has to govern a very numerous people; and not just any people, but a nation of God’s own choosing. So he asks God for a “listening heart” and “understanding mind,” in order to judge God’s people and “to discern between good and evil.”

A listening heart, and understanding mind, the ability to discern what is right and good; these are qualities essential to good governance. It speaks well of the young king, that he recognizes the enormous responsibility he has, yet he does not seek material gifts for himself, but gifts of character that will benefit his people.

If God’s command is really a test, Solomon passes with flying colours.

God is so pleased that Solomon has asked for discernment instead of riches, long life, or revenge, that God grants Solomon's request. Solomon's request is met, with the additional promise of "riches and honour." It is important to note that these material blessings are secondary. He speaks of himself as God's servant and seeks not his own personal gain, but the good of his people, *their* best life.

This promise needs to be carefully understood. How are we to theologically consider the role of "riches and honour" granted to Solomon from God, presumably as a blessing in response to Solomon's good faith? This is where modern interpretations fail us. In ancient Israel, riches were a sign of divine blessing, but material riches look very different during the age of Solomon.

In our current monetary society riches are often equated with individuals with assets many times more than the average household income. A monetary society stockpiles and hoards such riches, often accumulating them through unethical or minimally non-generous means. In examining a theology of riches, the words of Jesus from the context of a more monetary Greco-Roman world, will better reflect or make sense in our present day.

But, Solomon ruled an agrarian kingdom. Coinage had not yet been invented and most scholars suggest that trade was based on duty, obligation through reciprocity. Riches for Solomon's kingdom meant abundant harvest, protection from pestilence, and adequate rainfall. All

of these factors to production are impossible to stockpile. The agrarian life forced, year after year, dependence on God. It is precisely this dependence on God that Solomon shows in his response. And God answers.

Solomon has chosen a different style of kingship. He knows that a listening heart and an understanding mind are more valuable than traditional signs of kingship. The concept of “understanding” is not mere cognition, but integration with morality as seen with the clarification “able to discern between good and evil.”

Rejecting the pursuit of power, he chose instead to govern with the spirit of a servant. This story remembers Solomon as a humble man who realized that he was not adequate for the task of leadership. Yet, the authority was not Solomon, but God. God also offers him long life, but this time with conditions: “if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments.” After his encounter with God in his dream, Solomon moves to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices there in front of the Ark of the Covenant instead of staying at Gibeon.

Having established Solomon’s private piety, the story now turns to his public persona. In spite of everything, Solomon was famous for his great wisdom. His judgments in court were also praised to the skies, the most famous of them involving a couple of prostitutes. The account of the dispute between the two prostitutes is offered as further evidence that God has blessed the king with wisdom. At the conclusion of the story, we

learn that: “When all Israel heard about the judicial decision which the king had rendered, they respected the king, for they realized that he possessed supernatural wisdom to make judicial decisions.”

For children, and even some adults, this story is both horrifying and mesmerizing. How could two women argue over an infant? How could the great king be so seemingly cavalier about this infant’s life? What would you have done had you been one of the mothers? The monarch? Today we see the justice issues more clearly. We notice that the women, marginalised at best, have no names.

With knowledge of the way power does and does not work in the world, our impression of King Solomon is much more nuanced and complex. Did he give pause to what might happen in response to this infant’s life hanging in the balance?

The same power dynamic that showcases Solomon’s accessibility also allows a spectacle to be made of the two women. Yes, the story presents a clever riddle, but it is also a heartbreaking tale of cruelty, loss, and grief. Is Solomon as macabre as he is wise? Will the true mother reveal herself before Solomon slices apart the infant?

The power Solomon holds at this moment is breathtaking. In many paintings of this story, guards dangle the baby upside-down, clutching the infant’s ankle in one hand and a sword in the other. The detail reinforces the vulnerability of the people under Solomon’s charge.

Babies, prostitutes, widows, orphans: society's most defenceless members live and die at the will or whim of the king.

The story, with the two women and two babies, jerks on every human emotion we have. Children, grieving, death, frustration, fear, doubt, longing for justice, craving order, this story has it all. Thus the swift and irreversible judgment of the king is what the people crave.

Nevertheless, we are drawn into question about the scenario itself. Is the accusing woman reliable? How does she know the infant's cause of death, if, by her own admission, she was asleep when it happened? There are also some troubling assumptions about the grieving mother. In the depth of her grief, she appears to be indifferent to the death of another baby, even after she went to the trouble of trying to make the second infant her own.

Is Solomon's decision really all that wise? What would he have done if the woman hadn't cried out, actually divided the remaining "property?" Solomon's future seems bright, at least in this story, as God grants him favour, because Solomon has all the right words in all the right places. However, is that true wisdom? Is that **applied** wisdom? Do Solomon's later decisions reflect on his desire for God's will and the flourishing of the Israelites, the nation God chose?

For the narrator, this story is not really about the women or their babies. It is all about Solomon. There seems to be an ironic reading to this story,

since people would later have known he wasn't wise in practice. Solomon's takeover of the throne was violent and manipulative. His enslavement of the Israelites to build a temple, his marrying Pharaoh's daughter to form an alliance with Egypt, plus six hundred and ninety-nine more wives do not seem to be particularly wise moves. And just in case all the wives happened to be busy at the same time some evening, he had three hundred concubines who were ready to drop everything for him at a moment's notice. Some of these were Moabites or Ammonites, some were Edomites or Sidonians, and there were Hittites.

Furthermore, his taste for foreign ladies got him into all kinds of trouble. They worshipped a whole carnival of fancy foreign gods, and in his old age, Solomon decided to play it safe by seeing to it that not one of them went neglected. He put up expensive altars to Ashtoreth of the Sidonians, Milcom of the Ammonites, and Chemoth of the Moabites, to name just a few.

So all these later actions; prayers to foreign gods, building the temple after his own house, conscription of Israelites, foreign wives being allowed to persist in worship of foreign deities, do not seem like wisdom or valour, but fear. Solomon's choices and actions belie the impression here that he trusts God with his whole heart.

What are our own failures of wisdom, our own quick justices that fail to fully rely on God's grace? What is the wisdom we should be seeking as the communion of saints and as members of the body of Christ? What

is Solomon's legacy to us; what does the story of Solomon tell us?

Solomon's story is the story of humanity beginning with creation, with Adam and Eve. It is the story of God continually fixing, continually re-forming God's relationship with his creation. God's partner creatures lived in friendship with God, with each other, and with all creation. God smiled. God's joy was disrupted when the earth creatures decided they could find joy in ways other than living as partners with God. Humans decided to find joy by becoming their own gods. Eventually conflicts and wars broke out. God groaned. The harmony of the universe was disrupted. God thought of destroying his creation with a flood. After destroying most of the earth, God made a promise to Noah to never destroy the earth again - a *reformation* of the relationship with humanity.

Struggling in dealing with noncompliant creatures and idol worship, God again tries to re-form his relationship with humanity. He selects a family, Abraham and Sarah and blesses them promising descendants and land. God binds Godself to the people. Things seemed to be going well for God.

But this did not last long. With Joseph's brothers, we see how God's people have again become unfaithful. Time for an intervention. God enters Joseph's suffering in Egypt. Because Joseph was faithful, God blesses him and all of Egypt as well as Joseph's unfaithful brothers. Once again, things are good.

Moses has a special relationship with God who delivers him and all the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt. However, they again turn from God as they worship the golden calf they created while Moses was talking to God on the mountain.

Having reached the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, we find the Israelites are once again lured by the foreign deities and have turned from their God. Joshua calls the Israelites to renew their covenant with God.

David, too turned from God. He committed adultery and murder. Although forgiven, God predicts there will be a sword over David's house, his family, and his dynasty for all time. Now we have Solomon and the worship of many foreign gods and foreign altars built to them. This is the endless story of humanity and its relationship with God. Finally God sent Christ to re-form the relationship with humanity. That didn't fare any better. The relationship is broken in many ways.

Reforming, starting with creation, has been an ongoing process. The first Christian congregations were identified by their cities not a denomination. In 325 the Council of Nicea met in Rome to settle the Christological issue of the divine nature of God the Son and his relationship to God the Father - another reformation. These were followed by the Councils of Chalcedon and Constantinople, all deciding on the beliefs and reforms the church needed. At the time there was a variety of different beliefs. The official beginning of the Roman Catholic

church started in 590, so in a way, it too was a re-formation. In 1054, the Great Schism split the church into Western (Roman) and Eastern (Byzantine) branches, another reformation.

Then we had the Protestant Reformation from 1517 to 1648. As you can see, there was never just one reformation. From the beginning of creation, God has been working on establishing a relationship with humanity. Humans keep pulling away, breaking the relationship, and God keeps re-establishing, re-forming that relationship that God has always wanted, a friendship with his creatures.

We can rest assured that God works through a variety of people, all of whom are flawed and imperfect. **Yet still God raises the right people at the right time to do what is right in God's sight:** Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Jesus, Martin Luther, and many others. There is great hope and possibility in this knowledge and much that we can learn from their examples.

Finally, there is always a need for discernment and justice. Would you rather stand before Solomon or Jesus for judgement and justice? Jesus is not only right and just, but he also metes out compassion and mercy. Justice as displayed by Solomon is without mercy. It is cold in its threat to the life of the infant to get to the truth. Leadership - in the church - in the community - in the family - demands careful listening, practised discernment, justice, compassion and mercy. Leaders can walk confidently in their God-given authority. God will provide the tools and

wisdom to lead if we will but follow God faithfully and trust God. And may
God's will always be done.

Amen.

Prayers of the People Pentecost 21
Reformation Sunday October 30, 2022

THE PRAYERS (Gracious God **Hear our prayer**)

In grateful response to God's endless bounty of grace, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. Merciful God, as the living body of Christ, your church is in a constant process of transformation, checking and reforming itself against your holy word. Guide us as we search for and discern your will and direction in the new age ahead. Give us wisdom, a thirst for your truth and a love of your gospel. Send your Holy Spirit to dwell within and amongst us to guide and lead all who are searching for the source of all truth, Jesus the Christ.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

We thank you that Christians of differing traditions and opinions are learning to meet together and engage in meaningful discussions. We pray for the ongoing work of ecumenical dialogues between churches. We pray for the Anglican church in Canada and their bishop, Linda Nicholl. In places around the world where Christians are still taking up arms against each other, we ask you to bring peace, patience, acceptance, love, mercy, and compassion for one another as your one body in Christ.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ; begun, maintained and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. May it be true, engaging, glad, and active, as it endeavours to be faithful in doing your will. May your church be always faithful, gracious God, and ready to promote the cause of compassionate love, justice and peace.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

Gracious God, your church is in constant process of Reformation, and we thank you for the renewal and reformation you have brought to all your people through our baptism. Open our hearts and minds to being reformed as we let go of that which no longer serves your purposes. Prepare us to be renewed, inspired, and equipped in our lives as followers of Christ Jesus, through whom we are given a new life.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

Give strength and hope to those who are in bondage to oppression, poverty, or illness. Through your healing touch, free those who are sick, or dying. Comfort all those who mourn and, at the last, draw us to your holy city.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our national Bishop Susan and our Bishop Kathy here in our own Synod; for our synod councils, pastors, deacons, and teachers of the word, and for all lay leaders. Help them remain faithful to the truth. Let them proclaim the gospel boldly, through Word and service, to people everywhere who are weighed down by guilt and sin so that they might be set free.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

We ask for your blessing upon all reformers and peacekeepers in society and for all those who work to bring about justice and peace in this troubled and broken world. Guide governments and leaders everywhere and inspire them in your truth, so that at all times and in all places your will may be done.

Gracious God, **hear our prayer.**

Loving God, we trust that, by your Spirit, you will always lead your living church of your faithful disciples forward in truth, and that you will continue to keep reminding us of our covenant with you and with one another. Guide us and lead us, so that through our daily actions and words your renewing word may bring light, hope, and truth to this world that you love so much. By the power of your Son, now and forever, we pray,

Amen