

A Gift Fit For A King

Sermon, August 15, 2021

Texts: I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-21

Life is so like acting out a drama, a story, for which there is no real script. In a way, that's what's both so glorious and so frightening about life ... the script is more or less written as you go along! The actual living of life can be like arriving at a movie twenty minutes late ... you enter the theater, or turn on the TV, and all this action is well under way and we really haven't a clue as to what's happening and/or who or what is behind what's happening. You are thinking, *"Who are all these people? Who are the good guys and the bad guys? Why are they doing that? What's going on? How does all this fit together?"* Well, take that a step further ... sometimes we feel like we're living our lives as if we've stepped onto the stage of a drama or the set of a film, and here we are without a script in the midst of all that's going on and we're trying to figure out: *"Who are these people? Who are the good guys and the bad guys? Why are they doing that? Saying that? What's going on? What's the story line here? How does all this fit together? What's my role in this drama? What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to say? Who am I supposed to be?"* And trust me on this; I think it just gets more complicated as life goes on ... the years fly by, and we are still trying to figure out our roles and our lines in this melodrama we call life, and meanwhile the kids are relentlessly growing up, our responsibilities just seem to multiply, life's events come at us and sometimes blindsides us from every which way, and aren't there times you just want to stop the motion and commotion and cry out, *"Somebody tell me what am I supposed to do NOW?"*

Well, in a way, that's what the new young king Solomon is experiencing in our Old Testament reading this morning. He's been thrust onto the throne of Israel, and he, too, is without a script to follow in his starring role as the successor of David; we can estimate he was probably about twenty years old.

Life really isn't a script we follow; it is more like a series of dramatic unrehearsed scenes we "adlib" our way through as we live. I'm convinced that's why God chooses to communicate to us in a Book filled with stories. Stories that are 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 years old. The Bible just isn't a list of propositions of systematic theology, it isn't simply a book of rules and prescriptions and basic instructions. Oh, the propositions and the theology and the rules are in there; however, for the most part, the Bible is primarily a collection of great stories, dramas about ordinary men and women ... and I underscore that word ordinary ... who get caught up in the sacred drama of everyday life, and how they respond to the amazing grace and wisdom of God that keeps invading and intersecting their lives. These are ordinary people, people like us, people who are all a gloriously confusing mix of the good and bad, the holy and the earthy; real people who have a really hard time always discerning, much less doing, the right things in life. One message of the Scriptures is crystal clear: *There are no perfect people.* Everyone is a work in progress ... a potentially glorious work, depending on your response to, and honesty with, a gracious God Who loves you and really wants what is best for you. In my pastoral prayer later, I'll be using a wonderful line from a prayer of William Barclay: *"There is so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us that it ill becomes any of us to find fault with the rest of us."*

King Solomon is no exception. We know from the perspective of history that he did lots of things right, and that he did lots of things wrong. His very existence in the world was marked by an ambiguous mess of good and evil; he was the second son of David and Bathsheba. Those of you who know the story know that was a squalid union. To be sure, David and Bathsheba did what they could by the grace of God to set their lives right, but there's no question their original union was just steeped in reprehensible evil and sordid betrayal that caused great harm to many, even to the spilling of innocent blood. Also, prior to Solomon's recent ascension to the throne, there was much controversy about who the next king would be. Adonijah was David's oldest living son, and some, including Adonijah, thought Adonijah should be king. But David had promised the throne to Solomon. After David's death, and Solomon was officially installed as king, Adonijah became a source of serious dissension and difficulty. So, Solomon had Adonijah executed ... which may have provided some clarity as to who was now king, but not without a lot of hurt, turmoil and bloodshed.

Like Solomon, the process by which many of us have arrived to where we are in life hasn't been a perfect path. We might wonder how we wound up where we are. We may not have blood on our hands like David and Solomon, but we, too, have almost certainly hurt people along the way, and many people may have hurt us. And at times we may wonder if we have what it takes to keep going where we are. Will we make it? Will we survive the hard decisions, the inevitable conflicts, the loneliness, the anxieties and insecurities? These are the kind of questions that often come to us late at night, keeping us awake as we toss and turn in our beds.

And it was late at night, as Solomon was settling into a fitful sleep, that God appeared to him in a dream. God appeared and said, "Ask for whatever you want Me to give you." Now, this is an amazing request. Usually when God shows up in someone's dreams, He is not taking requests; He's giving orders. Imagine yourself late one night, after another hard and difficult day of trying to fulfill your ever increasing responsibilities, you shuffle into bed discouraged and toss and turn for hours before falling into a fitful sleep. And then God appears to you and says, "Tell me what to give you." How would you respond?

Besides the obvious things alluded to in the Time with the Children (*"Lots of money! A huge house! Nice cars!"*) I think most people would want to say, "Just make my problems go away!" Or perhaps, "Just make those problem PEOPLE go away." Or, "Lord, FIX those problem people!" However, if it is God who is indeed visiting you, it is not likely He has arrived to get you out of your problems and responsibilities; nor has He arrived to be your "hit" man. After all, He's the one Who called you to where you are in the first place!

Well, in what is probably his finest moment, the young king responds by asking God not to change his circumstances, nor does he request God change the people about him; Solomon asks God to change him. In this touching scene, Solomon prays, "You have made me king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties, I don't even know how to go out or come in! Who can govern this great people of yours? So give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between right and wrong, between good and evil." That it is what we most need. We need understanding, discernment, wisdom to distinguish between right and wrong, between good and evil. And that is what we most need in those leaders who would represent us, by the way ... we need wise leaders, leaders who have the desire and God-given ability to discern between right and wrong, good and evil, and who go on to act accordingly.

We do not need our leaders to always be right; sometimes leadership is best demonstrated by the humble ability to confess failure and change course. We do not need our leaders to make us prosperous or to take care of all our needs; sometimes leaders must appeal to that which is noble within us and call us to sacrifice. We do not even need leaders who are always strong; the Third Reich was built by leaders who were always strong ... and who persisted in calling evil good, and censoring or disappearing any who would differ.. But wise leaders who can discern between good and evil ... well, that is a gift from heaven. Prosperity can be good, strength can be good ... but wisdom, the ability to discern between good and evil, between right and wrong, well, again, that is a gift from heaven. And leaders who have that gift are a blessing to those they represent. Not only do we need leaders gifted with wisdom, we need the gift of wisdom ourselves. Given a chance by God to gain one gift, ask for a Gift Fit For a King. Ask for wisdom.

We need the ability, the wisdom, to discern between right and wrong, between good and evil. In this drama called life we are confronted with choosing between good and evil every single day ... every single moment, really ... and the answers aren't always clear cut. Sometimes you just have to go on instinct, and our instincts aren't always sharp. Often we are placed in positions of leadership, responsibility, authority ourselves. Be it a family, a church, a corporation, a school, a city, or even a nation, the leaders of these communities face many complicated decisions every day. Since people are not all good, nor all evil, and these communities we build are also a confusing mixture of good and not-so-good, even evil. The decisions are complicated by competing agendas and confused claims about what is good and evil. According to the Bible, the wise leader is committed to sifting through the complexity of mixed motives in order to discern good from evil. Calling people to the good may not be popular, it may not be profitable, and it may not always seem fair. Some may have to sacrifice more than others; some may get really upset. But wise leaders lead, and they do their best to lead toward the good and to practice what is good.

God granted Solomon's request, helping him to see the wise and discerning choices ... although we know now that as Solomon's life went on, he didn't always *make* the right choices God enabled him to discern. The problem, as Solomon's own life eventually illustrated, is that evil and human sin clutters the picture, making it harder and harder to discern the good, let alone follow it, once it is discerned. It's just so hard to find the clarity we so desperately need. The puzzle has been too complicated and cluttered and darkened by our hurt, our sin, and by the seen and unseen forces of evil.

Yes, we need wisdom in order to live. We need more wisdom than we have. That's why the glorious message and hope of the Gospel story is that the wisdom of God is found in a Person. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the wisdom of God. Jesus is so much more than just a teacher of information, telling us what to believe. He is so much more than just a teacher of morals, telling us how to behave. He is the personification of the wisdom of God. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life Who walks with us as our *Director* in the sacred, unscripted and at times dangerous drama of living.

And the better we know Him, the more His wisdom finds a place in our hearts and hones our instincts, making us wise, keeping us safe, enabling us to make the good and discerning choices as we live out the glorious, unscripted drama called life.