

“What Would You Ask For?”

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The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

I Kings 2:1-4, 3:3-10

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/what-would-you-ask-for/>

A Reading from the Royal Historian of the Transfer of Power in David’s Lineage

I Kings 2:1-4 Death of David

Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. The time David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. So, Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

1 Kings 3:3-10 God’s Question to Solomon

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.”

And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. And now, O Lord my God, you have made 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. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?” It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

**IF you were Solomon, what would you ask for?
The word of God for the people of God.**

Make no mistake about this, no matter who you are, whether you’re the King of Israel or the Queen of Sheba ... if you’re a leader, when you die, someone will rise up and take your place. King David has died and his obituary is painfully short for a man historians agree reigned at the height of Israel’s success. No expressions of grief, no poetic psalms written in his honor. No state funeral ... just the simple announcement that *“David rested with his ancestors and was buried.”*

Notice there's no lament when David died. The mighty king of Israel died in the midst of a long-held and public family soap opera. Perhaps people were tired of the drama of it all. There was little grief over David's death, just relief when it was over.

Two sons, Solomon and Adonijah competed for David's throne when the time of his death came. In the end, Solomon prevailed.

In reflecting on this transition of leadership I reread Joseph Heller's colorful novel, *God Knows*.¹ You likely remember Joseph Heller as the author of *Catch 22*. *God Knows* is a "flesh on the bone" novelist's telling of David's life and loves and of his great genius and his very visible human failures. Admittedly, Heller's book is more of a historical caricature than a historical novel. But it's what Heller does with Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba, that's striking. In Heller's novel, Solomon, the man known throughout history for his great wisdom, is depicted as a foolish simpleton, one who goes about in life with clay tablets under his arm so he can write down all the colloquial wisdom he overhears in everyday conversations.

- Some people collect sports memorabilia.
- Some collect salt and pepper shakers.
- Solomon collected wisdom ... everyday pearls of wisdom from every corner of the world as simple words intended to make life rich and meaningful.

Solomon was a librarian of the wisdom he overheard and scratched down on the clay tablets he carried around with him. Most of us have only viewed Solomon as wise beyond his years, but Heller portrayed him as a simpleton who collected wisdom but couldn't seem to learn from it. Maybe to understand Heller's point we should ask of ourselves, "How else do you explain the foolishness of life all around us?"

We spend more than we make. We live throwaway lives. We throw away perfectly good stuff every season only to go out and buy more stuff. We treat our friends like they are our enemies. We ignore our children and wonder why they grow up and despise us. We sit in church every week in a form of religious atheism and live as if there is no God. Solomon the simpleton is Heller's commentary on contemporary society.

Despite Heller's fictional story, there was a noble beauty about Solomon's request in this passage. God asked him what he wanted and he responded that deep down in his heart he wanted wisdom. It was a beautiful request and God answered it.

But after a few brief illustrations of his wise ruling, we are told he blew it. Solomon brought great wealth into the kingdom and started an ambitious building program, but then he

¹ Heller, Joseph, *God Knows*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984

compromised Israel's faith by making alliances through intermarriage and by introducing foreign deities to Israel. It was a peaceful pagan invasion the likes of which Israel had never seen and not at all a wise move on Solomon's part.

Solomon's reign marked the flowering of an artistic spirit. There was a cultural-intellectual revolution that took place during his reign. Solomon was a creative soul who put plans to many of the dreams conceived by his father. David had a throne on which to rule, but God did not have a throne on which the people could worship. Thus, a great and wonderful temple was built for the worship of God.

But something was missing. There was a poverty of the soul that was startlingly absent from the opulence of Solomon's life. In Solomon's time, the greatness of David's life still hung in the air as Israel enjoyed its finest days. There was peace in the land and the freedom they enjoyed is remembered until this day. But there was also foolishness stirring because while Solomon demonstrated that while he was bold in public works and building projects, he was weak in his relationship with God. He allowed the things of God to go lax. He forgot that the people needed a strong visible commitment to Yahweh as the one true God.

In Solomon's time, he was known to have hundreds of wives, maybe even thousands. More than likely, Solomon's marriages to outsiders were to the daughters of political and national foes. This may have been a good diplomatic policy that made for peace, but Solomon demonstrated a great naïveté about dabbling with other gods that came to find a home in Solomon's Israel. Read past the words and you realize Solomon forgot how to keep separate in his own heart the reign and rule that Yahweh demands of us in our allegiance of faith.

Solomon reminds me of a friend that I had in Houston who was caught up in the oil boom of the late 70's and early 80's. Those were heady days when the oil market had skyrocketed and independent wheeling and dealing could generate vast sums of money by negotiating large global oil deals. I walked into his garage one day and noticed six or seven full sets of golf clubs in large leather golf bags like the pros use lined up against the wall as if on display. They were all brand new and hardly scuffed at all and I asked him if he was opening a sporting goods store out of his garage. He laughed and said that he occasionally would be on the road and would stop in to visit with a client and they would go play golf and he wouldn't have his clubs with him so he would just buy a set right on the spot even though he had multiple sets at home.

It was a wild time and there was huge money for entrepreneurs willing to play the game. My friend was just a "good old boy" from Oklahoma who learned how to negotiate big oil deals and he had become amazingly rich. He was living a life beyond his wildest dreams. My lasting memory of him was the day I found him out by his pool talking furiously with "his people" about a deal he was trying to make on behalf of the nation of India for a few million barrels of oil blocked outside the Gulf of Aqaba. Literally, his whole world was wrapped up in closing the

deal and he was frantically trying to save himself. Ultimately he lost everything because he didn't live by the simple wisdom Solomon could have shared with him.

In the end, not even Solomon's wisdom could save him. Solomon spent his time and energies in acquisition and building. But he forgot to remember the simple things about God. For you see, God really asks very little from us: A love that is unhindered and undistracted, and a joyous response to the grace that we find so freely offered.

In the end, Solomon's harsh policies and high taxes dressed the stage for his great kingdom to divide into two weak kingdoms shortly after his death.

Solomon had the unique and generous opportunity to ask anything of God. With that unlimited possibility in front of him, he asked for a heart of wisdom. If you were invited by God to ask for anything, and you knew God would grant it, what would you ask for?

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