



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
August 18, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "The Foolishness of Wisdom"

1 Kings 3:1-14 (NRSV)

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord.

Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David, except that 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 great people of yours?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, "Because you have asked this and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or for the life of your enemies but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you, and no one like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other

king shall compare with you. If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

"The Foolishness of Wisdom"

Last Sunday was my first anniversary at Westminster, so I've been thinking lately about my first few months here.

Which, leads me to begin today with a confession:

Two summers ago, I was interviewing with the Pastoral Nominating Committee, and they asked me how comfortable I was with preaching every week. I said, 'very comfortable' because, how else do you answer that question? I'd been preaching once a month for years. How much different can preaching ever week be?

Turns out, a lot.

I was offered the position in June. I started in August. I worked on that first sermon at Westminster for 6 weeks; it went great. I worked on my second sermon at Westminster for 3 days – and the difference showed!

For those first couple of months, I approached my sermons with such anxiety. I would start thinking up sermon illustrations, for the next Sunday, as I was driving home from the previous Sunday, before I had even sat down to read the Scripture for the week. Throughout the week, I would scour the newspaper and radio for stories I found touching and relevant. I was so worried I would run out of material.

That approach worked...okay.

One thing I've learned, over the course of a year, is to trust the Scripture. I've learned to trust there's something in the Scripture, that holds more wisdom than I do, just by myself. There's something deeper there, than even the most beautiful or hilarious sermon illustration. I'm learning to be open to the text, and that I don't have to force it. There's always more than enough material, if you just wait upon the Spirit.

Do you do that?

Not with sermons, of course, but other parts of your life – do you ever try to force it?

Or have you just learned, over time, to trust the movement of the Spirit in your life? This was Solomon's dilemma.

Solomon comes off as the pious king here, choosing to ask God for wisdom instead of riches, but did you notice, in the first verses, that he actually isn't so sure, at the beginning, if God's going to come through?

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David.

Remember Egypt was still an empire. It was still *the* Empire, the same one that had enslaved Solomon's ancestors. In his day, it was still known for its brutality, for its exploitation of the nations.¹

As the book of Exodus tells it, Pharaoh is everything God is not:

- Pharaoh is the slave-master; God is a God of liberation.
- Pharaoh hordes wealth and power, God gives freely, grace upon grace.

So this is Solomon's temptation, now that he is king, now that he is Pharaoh's son-in-law. Will he be the ruthless, in-it-for-himself type of ruler that Pharaoh is?

After all, Solomon, by his own admission, is just 'a little child' – "I do not know how to go out or come in" he says to God.

And he was still living under the shadow of his father, the late King David, who seemed so much better at being a king than he is.

As Solomon says to God, "You [Lord] 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."

¹ I am thankful to Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc, 2000), 43-49, for this insight.

And isn't that so true to life?

Everybody else seems more put together than you do:

- Look at the lives my neighbors are living; I can't afford that!
- Look at the great work my co-worker is doing; I could never accomplish that!
- Look at that family's pictures on Facebook – they look so happy!

'Look,' says Solomon, 'when he was king, my father David did everything right. And I'm not sure I can do everything right, Lord. I'm not sure I even know what I'm doing.'

So, for Solomon, the temptation is to model his kingship after Pharaoh,

So, when God appeared to him in a dream, and said, "Ask what I should give you," perhaps Solomon was tempted to say, 'Success, riches, long life, the lives of my enemies.'

That's what Pharaoh would have said.

That's what makes a great king, right?

That's the image of success.

What would you have said?

Sure, God doesn't appear to us in dreams much anymore; but there's still this temptation, to live a life oriented around the prevailing image of success, which isn't too far off from pharaoh, after all.

The image of success is a life oriented around the self, accumulating all that you can, believing that your own happiness and security are the key ingredients of the good life.

Isn't this what the American dream tells us, after all?

Isn't that what consumerism, is all about, after all?

Consumerism gives us the illusion that happiness is something that can be bought. And that all the parts of our lives: our communities, our relationships, our

institutions, are all supposed to be centered around us, catering to our tastes and our needs, serving us, first, before serving others.

How else, can you explain, the economic disparities, all around us? How else can you explain, why the richest 1% of this world, owns half the world's wealth, while a third of this world, billions of people, billions of children, go to bed every night, without enough food to eat? How else do we explain *that*, except that it's a product, of a lie, that says only my own happiness, and your own happiness; my own security, and your own security, are what's key to the good life? And everything else, everyone else, comes second.

It's the water we swim in.

And it was Solomon's temptation, too, in 1 Kings, chapter 3.

And faced with that choice, between a kingdom oriented around himself, or one oriented around the will and love of God, Solomon was wise, and he chose the latter:

Ask what I should give you, says God.

And Solomon responds: *Give your servant...an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.*

Faced with the temptation, to gain in an instant, the perfect image of kingly success, what Solomon chose, instead, was a life open to the will of God and the guidance of the Spirit. He chose a life, oriented to the needs of the community, rather than a kingdom oriented around the king.

And he chose wisely, because a kingdom oriented around the king, may be the dominant image of the good life, but it never is really the good life.

A government centered around the leader's needs is another name for tyranny. And a self-centered life, will always feel incomplete:

- It will always be a life wanting more and more, seeking to satiate a hunger, that can't be satisfied with accumulation or success;
- It will always be trying to control the uncontrollable, always striving, to bend the world to its will, but the world doesn't bend that way;
- It will always be looking for the good life, but it will be doing so alone, because a self-centered life is a lonely life.

This is why Jesus says, in Matthew, that “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life...will find it” (16:25).

And Paul says, in Philippians, “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ” (3:7).

And our passage in Ephesians says, “Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (5:17).

Everyone is going to say, the good life centers on the self. It’s a life lived grasping for control and satisfaction. In a consumer-oriented society, like ours, we’re told the good life can be bought and sold.

But this is the mystery of the faith: that that image of success is an illusion. And instead, a life oriented around God and neighbor, is what we are each called to, each day.

Solomon had choice: the ways of Pharaoh or the ways of wisdom. And he chose the latter.

What are we going to choose?

And by ‘we,’ I mean also, the church.

The church has a similar choice.

Not just this church, but all churches, including this church.

Consumerism tells us, that our communities, our relationships, our institutions, are all supposed to cater to our tastes and our needs, serving us, first, before serving others.

Question:

Do we bring that expectation to the church?

Does the church exist to satisfy my needs and yours?

To some extent, yes, it does.

We exist in a consumer culture. It is the water we swim in.

It is the air we breathe.

We cannot help, but treat the church, like a product.

Are you satisfied with it? Does it meet your needs?

Does it have a good education program?

Does it have enough fellowship activities?

Are the sermons good?

What about the music?

What about the music?

What about the music?

Now, where have I heard that before?

I do discount these things, not by any stretch.

I too, need a church with all these things and more.

I too, a year ago, was on the market. A year ago, I was church shopping. And I had my list. And I had my needs.

What is the point of a church, that refuses to meet our needs?

But we are inevitably going to be disappointed, if we think, that's the point of the church: to satisfy our every and deepest need. The church is not a kingdom built for the king; it's not a club meant to please its members; it's not a product to be sold.

Because ultimately, it is God, not the church, who can satisfy those needs.² In fact, the church does not exist for its own sake at all. The church is only the church as it points beyond itself, in worship of God and in love of neighbor.

We're not supposed to treat the church like a product.

If we do, it's never going to live up, to our expectations.

It's never going to satisfy, our every need.

It's not meant to. What it is meant to do, what you and I are meant to do, is to witness, to the one, who can satisfy, our deepest longing:

Christ is the bread of life. Christ is the living water.

Jesus said: "Those who want to save their life will lose it."

The church will gain its life.

You and I will gain our lives.

Only as much as we are willing to see beyond ourselves, only so much as we are able to say, 'We are here, not for ourselves, but for one another, and to point beyond ourselves, up to Christ, the way, the truth, and the life.'

² Here I'm echoing insights I found in reading ch. 1 of M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009).

In doing so, we become the Body of Christ.
We walk in the way of wisdom. We rest in the power of God.
Amen.