

### Wildest Dream

With the recent record lottery winning, there has been a fair amount of discussion about how people would spend it if they had won. I've heard some say they would retire, go on a trip of a lifetime, buy a professional basketball team, and make sure their families were taken care of. What about you? While Solomon does not win the lottery, this scene almost sounds like a holy answer to one's wildest dream, if not an outtake from *Aladdin*. God comes to him in a dream and says, "Ask what I should give you." And Solomon responds, not with his own dreams of Starbucks for life or a yacht or a private island or even world peace, but "an understanding mind to discern between good and evil."<sup>1</sup>

Solomon is known throughout the tradition and history as the wise king. Maybe his wisdom comes from this encounter with God, or maybe he is already wise in asking for wisdom itself. Either way, God is thrilled with Solomon's request, so much so that God grants him wisdom and more—much more. What Solomon actually asks for is a "listening heart." This is no throwaway detail. As the spouse of an Egyptian princess, Solomon is aware of the legacy that his wife's heritage carries. Pharaoh was after all known for his hardened heart, his disregard for the suffering of the slaves and even his own self-interest in the end. His heart did not listen. He was not wise.

This is Solomon's high point. The curse on David's house that we heard about last week, the power struggles, bloodshed, and heartbreak that God unleashes in the wake of David's taking Bathsheba and conspiring to have Uriah killed have already come to pass, not only in David's lifetime but in Solomon's as well, and there is more in store. Solomon will go on to play the part of king in the drama, the kind of king God warned the people about. Like his father before him, Solomon takes. And he will take more. He winds up with hundreds of wives and eventually will enslave his own people to build his kingdom. On the heels of his reign, the kingdom will divide in two. And yet the scribes and the tradition insist on his being wise, at least in his best moments.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 3:9, NRSV

This tradition also want us to know that God is poised to give. Always poised to give. In God's question to Solomon in the dream, I hear echoes of God's lament from last week. In the midst of Nathan's words of judgment offered to David on God's behalf is that haunting line:

I gave you your master's house...and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more.<sup>2</sup>

It is God's character to give, and God is heartbroken when his beloved children insist on taking. And here again, abundantly faithful to his covenant with this one who sits on Israel's throne, God is eager to give. And give God does. Solomon's reign is marked by peace and prosperity. It is he who builds the Temple, as well as a palace for himself. He enjoys riches and fame, just as God promises. One could argue that none of it is truly deserved. Especially when we consider where God shows up and offers the gift.

Because not only has Solomon already made his way onto shaky ground through his marriage with Pharaoh's daughter, he is not where he should be. The writer tells us that Solomon loves the Lord, but he spends a fair amount of time worshipping in the high places, sites where other gods are worshipped in addition to or instead of the God of Israel. In his defense, the Temple is still just a dream itself, but Israel's identity is shaped by the covenant that God shall be their God and that they will worship God and only God. And the historians who write down Solomon's story for us are ambivalent about Solomon's worshipping in the wrong place at what should be the wrong time. But they also make it clear that instead of a reprimand, God offers gifts. Generous, underserved gifts.

That's who God is in relation to this covenant community. No matter how many times they—or we—disappoint God or let God down or worship someone or something that is not God, the Lord of the Universe comes to us and offers us gifts and trusts us to use those gifts for the good of the community, for God's work in God's world.

The winner of the billion dollar lottery has yet to come forward, but the residents of the tiny town of Simpsonville, South Carolina where the ticket was purchased have hopes that the winner will spend his or her winnings locally. The store owner, C.J. Patel intends to "do some good with" the \$50,000 he won as the seller

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 12:8, NRSV

of the winning ticket and hopes that the winner will, too. Tony Cooper, the chief executive of the South Carolina lottery offered some advice to the winner, “Take a deep breath.” And meet with legal and financial advisors before making any decisions.<sup>3</sup> In other words, be wise. Seek wisdom before using the gift. That’s what wisdom is, after all. Wisdom is not wise on its own or in a vacuum. Wisdom is about discernment and understanding and then choosing what is good and right. And even faithful.

This morning you are electing women and men to serve as leaders in and for this community in the coming year. They are a diverse and talented group with insights and experiences that will serve them well in these roles. And with God’s leading, they will use their insights, their experiences, their talents, and, yes, their wisdom to guide us in where God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. And they will make mistakes along the way. We all do. To be wise is not the same as being perfect. Even the wisest leaders make mistakes. And when mistakes are made, wise leaders acknowledge where they went wrong, ask forgiveness, and seek God’s guidance in making things right. Wisdom is not about pontificating from on high. It is not about bombast or bluster. Rather wisdom—true wisdom is grounded in listening. Listening and serving. Because that is what wise leaders do. They seek to listen first on behalf of the community and to use their God-given talents and insights in service of that community. They serve a God who is always poised to give, and so wise leaders who listen well are poised to give and serve, too.

We are in the midst of stewardship season, the time of year when we give thanks for all that God has given us and seek God’s guidance for how we will share those gifts in the coming year. And when we talk stewardship, we talk money, as we should, but stewardship is not only about money. Yes, in order to be faithful in supporting the robust ministry God is building here we need money to pay staff, maintain buildings, buy curriculum, keep the lights on and the organ tuned, and plow the snow we are sure to receive. But God gives us other gifts, too. Creativity, energy, love, intelligence, experience, and compassion, just to name a few. And God gives us wisdom. Unlike the lottery payout, wisdom is not once-and-done. Wisdom is always reflecting, always considering, always listening and trying to discern the good and act on it. Holy wisdom stays in conversation with the all-wise God. It is less a question of what Jesus would do in one fixed instance, and more a question of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/24/mega-millions-jackpot-winner-reported-south-carolina-its-not-official>

constantly and consistently asking what the truly wise God would have me or have us do here and now. And heaven knows this community and the larger world can use wisdom. Solomon will lose his way. He will turn his back on wisdom and the God who gives it, but God's wisdom is still a good thing, ever available to those with hearts turned to God like open ears. Wisdom has always been a good thing, but perhaps it is a needed thing especially now. Because the challenges we currently face are not going to be solved by anger, hatred, fear, or greed. They haven't been solved that way so far. When migrants risk their lives to flee never-ending violence, when homemade pipe bombs and poison-laced letters are mailed to political leaders of all persuasions, when countless children starve in the midst of Yemen and Syria and in our own backyard, when one shooter sets his sights on an African-American church in Kentucky and winds up killing two African-American strangers in a grocery store and another yells anti-semitic rants and fires into a synagogue during worship, we can no longer deny that we are living in a world hungry for wisdom, hungry for holy listening, hungry for a better way. The world's many challenges are not easily solved. Society's tattered social fabric is not easily mended, but wisdom—genuine, deep-breath, God-given wisdom could help. In fact, it could be the world's only hope.

If God came to me and asked what I long for in my wildest dreams, I'm fairly certain I'd be quick to ask for health, comfort, peace for the world, and happiness for all those I love. Most days, I might even ask to win the lottery. But what if God wants more for me, more for us? What if God longs for me, for us to be wise, to listen with our hearts—not to our fears and our hurts—but to God's leading and God's guidance? From what I read here in these ancient words, our God longs to be in holy conversation with us, longs to give us the world, to shape a place and people grounded in compassion, justice, hope, and love through us, to build the covenant community in and with us, to give us a life beyond our wildest dreams. So could it be that our being wise is God's wildest dream?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.