

Wisdom

1 Kings 3

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\*Title Slide

This past week there has been a lot of discussion about what some of us would do if we won a lot of money. Like, a lot of money, over a billion dollars. The Mega Millions lottery was that big. I am amused that John and I don't play the lottery, until there is a really big prize, like this week's billion plus dollar prize. 500 million dollars apparently isn't worth our time, but a billion is. We didn't win. And neither did you. It was kind of fun while it lasted, though. I enjoyed listening to what some of you would do with the money if it was yours. Many of you had big plans to use your winnings to make a difference in this community and in the world. And that made my heart happy.

The thing about winning that much money is that it's so much money a person could do so many things, I would think the winner could make a lot of their wishes, at least the ones that require money, come true.

\*Since we didn't win, let's imagine finding an old lamp, rubbing it to dust it off, and out pops a genie, offering one wish. What would your one wish be?

Today's text begins with King Solomon's dream and his one wish.

\* Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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?"

<sup>10</sup> It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. <sup>14</sup> If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

<sup>15</sup> Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

Solomon's request for wisdom seems to be, well, wise. Clearly, the request pleased God and was also practical based on Solomon's inexperience and the context of this part of the story of Israel. Consider, Solomon did not need a rod, like Moses, as the people had already been freed from Pharaoh's grip. He also didn't need military prowess like his father, David, Israel was settled in the land God promised them. What Solomon did have to deal with was a kingdom

that was made up of tribes that needed to be united. Given these circumstances, wisdom was, indeed, a wise request.

Biblical wisdom is more than what we call “book smarts” or “street smarts.” In the Bible, wisdom is about organizing life around God’s ways. Organizing is something I enjoy. As taxing as moving from one home to another is, I do enjoy organizing a new place. When John and I moved into our last house in IL, my BFF from Minnesota came down to help us get organized in our new home. The day we moved in, while I was putting away clothes and organizing closets upstairs, Melissa was unpacking the kitchen. We worked hard all day and at the end of the day, I was thrilled to find that we had made enough progress to actually use the kitchen to cook dinner.

Melissa went to take a shower while I started dinner. I quickly realized that my new kitchen was organized around Melissa’s way of doing things and not around Kelley’s way of doing things. I couldn’t find anything. Nothing made sense. The pans were in the wrong spot, the potholders were too far from the stove, I was so disoriented. I think it took me twice as long to make dinner as it would normally. The day Melissa went home, I rearranged the entire kitchen. I organized the kitchen around Kelley’s ways.

True wisdom organizes our lives around what is important to God, bringing our souls, the center of what it means to be human, into alignment with God’s ways. We human beings, after all, have the propensity to organize around the wrong things. We organize around our fears...fears that there won’t be enough, fear that we aren’t enough, fear of each other. And it is usually easier for us to recognize these ways in others than it is to see them in our own lives. Even Solomon, the one gifted by God with the wisdom to judge others, seemed unable to see the ways in which he did not practice wisdom in his own life.

\*On one hand, there is the story of Solomon's wise judgment in favor of one woman over another with regard to the question of whose baby was still alive. Unable to tell which woman was telling the truth, Solomon suggested the baby be cut in half. One woman said, "Great idea." The other said, "Give the baby to her, don't kill him." Solomon gave the baby to the mother who was willing to give him up, rather than have harm come to him. He also built the spectacular Temple in Jerusalem, using the very best resources. Israel, in general, enjoyed a time of great prosperity while Solomon was on the throne.

On the other hand, Solomon had an excessive appetite for power, money, women, and even food. In addition to the Temple, he built a grand palace for himself and an administrative complex, all on the backs of forced labor. He ordered relatives he perceived as a threat killed. And, as a result of marrying many foreign wives, he eventually began worshipping their pagan gods. This was foreshadowed for us in today's story, "...he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place." Later, Solomon worshiped the gods of those "high places," and because of that, God told Solomon he would lose his kingdom, which eventually happened, but not until after he died. After Solomon's death, Israel split into the northern and southern kingdoms, Israel and Judah.

It's important to note that 1 and 2 Kings, like the books of Joshua, and 1 and 2 Samuel were most likely written during the Babylonian exile, centuries after the time period in which the stories were placed. These stories were remembered, recorded and passed down in order to encourage the Israelites to continue to pursue a right relationship with God, even in exile, even minus their beloved Temple, which by then had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The point for the author was, when God is the center of our lives, good things happen. When we center our

lives on other gods, very bad things happen. For a people far from home, wondering if they would ever see their beloved Jerusalem again, this message was an important one. These stories were the answer to, "Why us?" In today's story, even though Solomon worshiped in Gibeon, rather than Jerusalem, God was there, even in that very unexpected place. And God was in Babylon with the exiles. God is in Pittsburgh, Washington D.C., Indonesia, North Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Bartlesville, OK.

Today we are reminded again that God is a risk taker, risking everything on flawed human beings. Solomon, like David, whom we talked about last week, did great things and did really awful things. I ran across a poem this week, written by Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, that speaks to this double-sidedness of human nature. It's called, "Please Call Me by My True Names."

\*I am the twelve year old girl,

refugee on a small boat,

who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,

\*and I am the pirate, not yet capable of seeing and loving.

Human beings are complicated and messy. We are survivors *and* oppressors, we cry out for justice *and* support systems that are, at their roots, unjust.

Solomon was very wise, yet he, more often than not, made decisions in his own life, that were based on fear. He was ruthless, greedy, and cruel. Maybe the same can be said for all of us. We are wise and we are not. The trick, I think, is to be wise more than we aren't. As I think about the tasks before Solomon, when God granted his wish, I can't help but think about the tasks ahead of the leaders of our country. It seems like, in some ways, we are in the same place. Israel was a bunch of tribes in need of unity and we, in this country, have retreated to our tribes and it is not serving us well.

\*Division is not wise. Isolation, fearfulness, and hatred are not wise. These are not the ways of God. In the story of Solomon, we see the consequences of organizing life around “what’s in it for me.” We must be “other serving,” rather than “me serving.”

God’s ways are about community and the common good. They are about taking care of our neighbors and valuing all human beings. We must care more about our life together than we care about our individual preferences. And we must insist that our leaders, whoever our leaders are, work toward unity and not more division. We are literally killing each other over our differences. We must organize our way of being around the ways of compassion and mercy.

One last thing I want to point out this morning. As we think about Solomon’s story, trying to figure out where we see ourselves in the story, let’s resist the urge to paint ourselves like the ones Solomon oppressed or as the women coming to Solomon to be judged. The truth is, in our world today, we are often more like Solomon than we are his subjects. We cling to our money and our things, misuse our power, take more than we need, and use our God-given gifts for ourselves, rather than for the larger human community. Wisdom helps us see ourselves and others clearly. May God grant us wisdom.

I end this morning with this poem, written by Cristine Collins Warring:

What shall I give you?  
God, we want it all.  
Your great love  
Your faithfulness  
A special place near you.

What shall I give you?  
God, we want it all.  
But it is hard to turn loose

Hatred, apathy, selfish desire  
Pride, ego, our own understanding.

What shall I give you?  
God, we want it all.  
To see the difference  
To make the choice  
To be wise and loving.

What shall I give you?  
God, we want what You want.  
Steadfast love for all. Amen.