

The Right Thing to Ask

2 Chronicles 1: 7-13

**First Presbyterian Church
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This morning we begin a series on Solomon. He was the king that led Israel to her greatest period of glory and cultural dominance. Solomon is remembered for his fabulous wealth, his magnificent building projects, his deep wisdom and his colossal folly. Traditionally, most of the Proverbs, the book of Ecclesiastes and, as you might suspect, the Song of Solomon are all attributed to this poetic king.

Today is also senior Sunday, a day when we recognize the high school seniors in our church who will soon be graduating and beginning a new phase of life. It seems fitting then, to take up this story from the very beginning of Solomon's reign.

I don't know how many of you are chronological thinkers. But when I hear about someone from history, I like to know their dates so I can put them in relationship to other people and events I know about. As a handy marker, King David ruled over Israel around 1000BC. His forty year reign wrapped around the one thousand years before Christ mark. That helps me coordinate when we're talking about. It's 2017, so Jesus lived among us roughly two thousand years ago. King David, who wrote so many of the psalms, was a thousand years before Jesus, so about 3000 years ago. Now Solomon was the son of King David. He ruled for forty years, right in the middle of the 900'sBC. He was the third king of Israel, and under Solomon the vision of David became a reality. Solomon oversaw the construction of the first great Jerusalem Temple, the place where the LORD said his name would dwell.

So that's where we are in history. About a thousand years before Jesus, Solomon becomes king. His reign marks the glory years of the kingdom of Israel. Solomon was young when he was anointed king, perhaps in his twenties. He quickly found out that there was a lot more to being king than giving orders. Solomon took the throne in the midst of political intrigue. He had enemies from the start and older, more cunning people trying to take advantage of him. Failure was a real possibility. Just like it is for any of us. Especially when we're starting out on a new stage of life. Whether it's leaving high school, beginning a marriage, starting

a practice, having kids, taking a new job, learning to live as single again, or moving to a new state. A new stage means challenge at the beginning. It means not being entirely sure what you're doing. It means opportunity and danger, potential for joy or calamity.

In our passage this morning, the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream. He made an extraordinary offer to Solomon: Ask what I shall give you. In other words, "What do you want?" It's almost like finding a genie in the bottle. But you get one wish. What do you want? If you had one request to make of the LORD at this stage in your life, what would it be?

Now I would not have blamed Solomon if he had answered, "Keep me safe from the enemies who want to kill me and seize power." Or, "LORD, make me a successful king who gets this temple project done like David my father wanted." Or, "Make the land prosper with big harvests and growing flocks. Let everyone have all they need." I don't think there's anything wrong with praying for success. Or praying for protection. Or asking for provision. Or for peace and contentment. Those are all good things to pray. But if you only had *one* request, which would be the *best* prayer? What gets to the heart of it that makes all the others fall into line?

When we were kids we used to talk a lot about genies in the bottle. It seems like in the legends, the genies would grant three wishes. So we'd argue for hours about what to ask for. Straight A's. Girlfriends. Money. National championships. One clever kid would realize that the key wish to ask for was "More wishes!" That's the challenge for Solomon. The LORD said, "Ask what I shall give you." Ask anything. Solomon had to reply with a request that would multiply through all the years of his kingship. The only way to do that was to get to the heart of who he was, what he was called to do and what he really wanted.

Solomon replied, "You have shown great and steadfast love to David my father, and have made me king in his place. O LORD God, let your word to David my father be now fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust of the earth. Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can govern this people of yours, which is so great?"

This reply showed that Solomon already had the wisdom for which he asked. Let's think how brilliant his reply is.

1) Solomon remembered where he came from. He was David's son. He knew that the LORD had led David through many trials and dangers. God had promised David that he would always have a son on the throne. The LORD had made an

everlasting covenant with David. Solomon owned his place in the family. This is my destiny. This is where I came from.

2) Solomon recognized what he was called to do. He had a calling on his life. He had work to do. He knew, "I must govern this great people." He accepted his responsibility.

3) But third, he kept the right perspective. "I know that I am responsible for these people. But they are not mine. These are not my people. They are *your* people, O LORD. I may be their king, but I am *your* servant." That's a crucial awareness in a leader. All this responsibility and all this power given to me is not for myself. I belong to you O LORD. And the people I lead are not mine. They are yours. This work is not for me and my glory. It's for you and your glory. That could be the people on your sports team. Your partners in a practice. Your patients and clients and employees. Your sisters in a sorority. Your students in a classroom. Your family. Your customers. Your staff. Wherever you exercise influence, you have responsibility. And the wise person realizes, this is not just for me. This is from God and for God, and my work is to help these people flourish so they can rejoice in God's great love and care for his world.

This same story is also told in the book of I Kings. That account adds some details that I really like. In Solomon's reply, he says, "And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, though I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people...give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil" (I Kings 3: 6-9). Solomon expressed humility before God. He admitted he did not know how to do what he was called to do. Even though he was probably in his 20's, he still felt like he was but a little child. He didn't feel like even knew how to go about doing what he had to do, how to go out and come in.

Who hasn't felt that way on the first day at a new school? Or a new job? Or a marriage? Or in a new position? You get dressed up to look all confident in the halls, and end up being unable to open your locker. You arrive ready to take your new company by storm, but report to the wrong office. You make a terrible first meal that week after the honeymoon. It seems like you can't even do the first part of this huge new stage of life. You just feel like a lost little kid.

Solomon had the wisdom to ask for wisdom. Show me how to tell the difference between right and wrong in every decision. Show me what to do first.

What to make important and what to let go. Show me how to govern. Give me enough sense to know how to manage my emotions. To budget my time. To make the right choices. Find the right friends. Order the right priorities. Show me, LORD!

Jesus taught his disciples the very same thing. "Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we wear?'. For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Mt. 7: 31-3). Seek first your Father's kingdom and everything else will shake out as it should. This was true for Solomon, one of the most powerful men in the world. It's true even for the least of us. You may only be responsible for yourself. But your life is in itself a kingdom. We all have a realm over which we rule, even if it's just about the tiny choices we make each day about our words and attitudes and movements. The wisdom of Solomon, which is the wisdom of Jesus, points the most powerful and the weakest to the same goal. Put your kingdom in service to the one true King. All power you have comes from God. And the only thing that matters is how what you do partakes of his glory. So put your kingdom at his disposal. Whatever size king you are, you are a servant of the most high God. And all you do in your realm is for his service. Offer your life, your work, and your efforts to him to use as he sees fit. Ask for wisdom to see how what you do in your daily life can serve him and bless others. The rest will shake out.

Every year, I love meeting with the seniors for a month of Sunday school classes. At the beginning, I ask them to write down questions they'd like to discuss throughout our time together. I am always moved by these questions. There's a lot going on in the hearts, minds and souls of these we are about to launch. At the heart of all their questions is the request for wisdom, to know how to do the right thing and stay in God's will.

Some questions are more specific and straightforward.

- How do I know which college to choose? And what to major in?
- How do I make new friends when I'm away from home? How do I find the right people?
- How can I keep up my grades when I don't have the structure of my parents' rules and there are so many distractions?
- How do I deal with the freedom of college and not fail?

Those are all great questions. They are about wisdom. How do I govern my life to keep flourishing and meet the expectations that are upon me?

Other questions go very deep.

- How do I find my true purpose, God's plan for me?
- How do you relate with those with radically different priorities and worldviews?
- How do we know that Christianity is the right religion when there are other people of other religions who feel just as strongly about their faith as I do about mine?
- How can you tell the difference between real Christians and fake Christians?
- How do I stay close to God when no one else seems to care and there are so many temptations?

These are the very real questions that arise from the hearts of people who know that God has created us, claimed us for himself and called us to serve him all our days. They are the same questions we each keep asking all the days of our lives. How do I live effectively and fruitfully and joyfully *from* God in my daily life? And how do I live *for* God in the world, no matter what I am doing? Give me wisdom that I may live from your call and claim and live for your glory and purpose.

Once, the apostle Paul was asking the churches to take a collection for the believers in Jerusalem who had fallen on hard times. He wrote about how amazed he was at the amount given by the churches in Macedonia who were themselves quite impoverished. They had little power but they still gave powerfully. Paul wrote of them, "They gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us" (2 Cor. 8:5). There is the secret to receiving wisdom from God about our lives. They gave themselves first to the Lord. We acknowledge that he is God. He made us and he claims us. We accept. We offer ourselves to him. No matter what servants. We give ourselves to go where he sends. We ask for guidance. "Then by the will of God they gave themselves to us." Once we have offered our lives to God and asked for him to guide us, we go forth into whatever responsibilities we have and give ourselves to others. We love. We serve. We care.

The heart of wisdom is very simple. We give ourselves wholly to the Lord Jesus Christ who has called us to himself. He is the king, and we bow to him. We ask to be commanded. Then we give ourselves to those he places in our midst. We do our work. We live our lives. We trust his guidance to emerge as we are yielded to him.

The dynamic is the same whether you are 18 about to launch into life away from home or 88 about to launch into life away from this world. It's the same dynamic whether you govern a nation, or only the little sphere of your life. "They gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us."

Riches and long life and success and prosperity may or may not follow. But those, if they come, are only by-products. And often they are terrible temptations. What we really want is found in both success and failure, both prosperity and adversity, in both sickness and health. The key that unlocks flourishing in life is giving ourselves, moment by moment, in this moment, to the LORD. To say, "You are the King. I am the servant. I don't know how to go in or out on my own. Guide me. Give me the wisdom to live as your servant. For your glory and the good of others." Beloved, that prayer, he delights to answer. Give yourselves to the will of God. He will do it!