



First United Church of Oak Park

At the Gates of the City

1 Kings 3: 3-15

The Rev. John Edgerton

August 15, 2021

King Solomon, he is famous for his wisdom. So famous, in fact, that to say someone is as wise as Solomon is just an intensifier indicating how very, very wise a person really is. One piece of Christian tradition is to count Solomon as the author of three books of the Bible — Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (sometimes called the Song of Solomon). These three books form the core of what could be called the wisdom literature of the Bible. That is, taken together these three books represent together a codex of practical life lessons, what to do and what not to do in order to successfully navigate life.

That's normally what people think of as wisdom — it's a trait related to decision-making. The wise person will make decisions that lead them toward good results or — barring that — the best results possible given the circumstances. Hence, wise King Solomon's reign as king was tremendously successful, succeeding where others might fall prey to difficulty. That's normally what is thought of by the word "wisdom" in our culture. And it's not untrue of what the Bible means by the word "wisdom." That is a part of it; wisdom does indeed involve wise actions.

But there's more to wisdom than that in the Bible. In the book of Proverbs, we see Wisdom presented as being a divine woman, a heavenly feminine being who stands at the gates of the city calling out to anyone who will listen to follow her. She is presented in the book of Proverbs, Chapter 8, as being the very first being created by God, before any other part of creation. The woman Wisdom is called a master worker who is working beside God. As God sets the limits to the sea, Wisdom is at work. As God marks out the foundation lines of the earth itself, Wisdom is at work. Wisdom is presented as demiurge; that is, she is an artisan who applies eternal principles in creating a physical world. Wisdom is the reason why things work the way that they do. Why the tides are orderly, why the heavens move with perfect law. Lady Wisdom, the book of Proverbs says, has placed them in that order.

Wisdom is a fascinating figure in the Bible. She stands in the city gate calling out to anyone — that is, wisdom is available to anyone great or small, high or low, rich or

poor, anyone who is willing to listen, anyone who is willing to ask for her help. And the help that Wisdom offers is insight into how the world works. How human life works. Wisdom, after all, is responsible for the underlying principles that stand behind everything in creation. Wisdom as a human trait, then, is a kind of insight. It's the ability to look beyond the basic appearances of a circumstance to see what is really going on. And by understanding what is really happening in the world, the wise person can chart a course that shuns the bad, avoids the foolish, and finds its way to good.

Normally, we associate wisdom with age. This is shown by a kind of inversion in the compliment of saying that someone is wise beyond their years. Wisdom is normally associated with age. And this makes sense. After long years of seeing human life play out a myriad of ways, a person is able to discern the patterns and rhythms and principles that stand invisibly behind the appearances.

But back to King Solomon. That's how we got on to this, after all. Though wisdom is associated with age, King Solomon is granted wisdom at a very young age, simply as a gift from God. Solomon asks for an understanding mind — sometimes translated as a “listening heart” — to understand the difference between good and evil. And God is pleased, and grants Solomon wisdom as well as the myriad gifts that can attend a life lived by the precepts of wisdom.

As we all continue to navigate a world filled with trouble and danger all around, as we all seek to live lives as best we can in a time when easy answers are a distant memory, I recommend to you the path of wisdom. And this is the good news that we read here in the Bible, from First Kings to Proverbs, from the foundations of time 'til today. Wisdom is something anyone can have. Wisdom stands at the gate of the city, she stands in the center of Scoville Park, she parks herself in the centermost place of life and calls out to anyone who will listen to follow after her. Wisdom is no respecter of persons — anyone great or small, high or low, rich or poor — anyone can be wise. The only requirement is that a person lives life and they will have all the study material they need. And although wisdom is normally associated with age, take it from the Book of Kings: Wisdom is not a trait of age; wisdom is a gift from God. We can pray for wisdom, and as we see with Solomon, God is well pleased when we pray in this way. Because when we pray for wisdom, what we are doing is seeking to know the will of God so that we might do it. Because wisdom was created by God, the world and the mechanisms of its workings, life and the way people act, wisdom stands as the organizing principle behind all of those things. To act in a wise way is to act the way God would act were God in your shoes. That is wisdom; she is a great and marvelous gift. Thanks be to God, and may we all seek after her, diligently.