

"The Beginning of Wisdom" (I Kings 3)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

Elkin Presbyterian Church

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Do you remember that childhood question that we asked of one another, a question that I have never entirely outgrown? If you had but one wish and you could wish for anything in the world, what would that be? When asked as a child, I would always say, "I wish for three wishes" How did you answer that question as a child and how would you answer now as an adult? If you could wish for one thing, what would that be? In our OT lesson this morning, we heard the story of Solomon's wish, his prayer to God to be granted wisdom. I can understand why Solomon would ask for wisdom. It was after-all, a great turning point not only in Solomon's life but also in the life of his nation. Solomon's father, David, the beloved King of Israel was dead, and now all eyes of the people rested upon his son, heir apparent to the throne. The question in the mind of his people was the same question that probably kept Solomon tossing and turning through the night, "will I be able to measure up to the magnitude of the task before me?" When Solomon did finally fall asleep he had a dream in which God said, "Ask me what I should give you". And Solomon replied, "Give thy servant an understanding mind to govern the people that I may discern between good and evil." This morning I would invite all of us to join with Solomon in reflecting together on this question: what is the beginning of wisdom?

At this point in your faith journey, can you claim as your own, Solomon's heartfelt prayer for wisdom? What is it about the life that you are living right now that makes you cry out in your need for greater wisdom? Perhaps you are like the young Solomon in a time of transition in which new challenges and responsibilities are coming at you and you are not at all sure that you will measure up to them. Could it be health issues? Financial anxiety? Family struggles? Perhaps it is simply that your life is at a crossroads and you are not sure which direction to take. Whatever it is that we are facing, we all need the strength and courage that wisdom gives to continue faithfully along the path that is set before us. These can be moments for us in which like Solomon, we cry out to God for greater understanding, for clarity and insight about how to continue to live our lives as faithful people. The beginning of wisdom is found in our heartfelt desire for it for the living of our lives. We become wise as we attempt –both successfully and unsuccessfully to honor God's desire for compassion, mercy, justice and truth in the practicalities of our daily lives. We desire wisdom for the living of our lives, so that we are more fulfilled, more responsible, more loving and just in all that we do.

The first lesson that the young Solomon teaches us is that the beginning of wisdom is found in the prayerful acknowledgement that we don't have the wisdom that we need or desire. The beginning of wisdom is the humility one rightly feels in the face of all that we do not know or understand. All of us from time to time encounter that person whose world view is like a castle complete with walls and battlements so high and dense that no new idea or insight can possibly find entrance. I believe that the worldview of the wise person is a dwelling place with lots of open windows and doors letting in new light and fresh breezes of inspiration. The worldview of the wise one is a dwelling place that is

always under construction, a work in progress, never complete. Whether they are nine years old or ninety-nine, a wise person is one who is still asking questions, still curious, still learning from their lives and from their world. But the beginning of wisdom is more than the humble acknowledgement of what we do not know. The beginning of wisdom is the capacity to experience awe before the mysteries that cannot be known at all.

It was true in the time of Solomon; it is even truer today: there is a vast difference between wisdom and information. We live in the so-called information age; through the Internet we instantly have access to information about millions of subjects from all across the planet. But we do well to remember that all this information is not the same as wisdom. In fact this overload of information may be one of the chief obstacles to gaining wisdom. A wise person recognizes that truth is more than simply that, which can be known; information to be dissected, analyzed, and broken down into its constituent parts. There is truth that can only be known at all through the spiritual capacity to experience awe in the face of mystery. Our reading from the Psalm 111 comes at it this way; "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom". Now I have always felt some ambivalence about this verse of scripture. The God in whom I entrust my life is not a god that I fear as I would fear an arbitrary tyrant who has power over me. We are right to put as much distance as we can from a theology that portrays God as someone to be feared. But let us not go to the opposite extreme, of reducing god to a psychological truism that we can pull out of your back pocket whenever we need a warm and fuzzy. I believe that psalm 111 proclaims that the beginning of wisdom is found in the capacity of the human heart for reverence before the sacred; for awe in the face of the holy.

As I was doing some research for this sermon, I ran across a quotation from a book called the Wisdom of Solomon, which turned out, is one of the books of the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha is a collection of writings that today is considered to be outside of the canon of what we accept as the Bible; but in other times and places; both Jews and Christians have looked upon these writings as part of the sacred scriptures. What you find in the apocrypha is a book called the Wisdom of Solomon and it is a continuation of Solomon's prayer for wisdom in 1 Kgs. 3. The writer, known as the Sage, assumes the role and voice of Solomon and offers further testimony about wisdom. The Sage testifies that Wisdom is about life, not just physical life, but a pulsing, vibrant, relationship with the God of life. Wisdom is personified and given a name as Sophia, a divine feminine person who enables, blesses and confers life on all that seek her. Hear these ancient words from the Wisdom of Solomon, ch.6: 13 "*Wisdom hastens to make herself known to those who desire her; he who rises early to seek her will find her at his gate*". It is not so much that we seek wisdom as wisdom is seeking us. Wisdom is not something esoteric or removed from life like the austere wisdom figure on the mountaintop. The seeker of wisdom does not have to ascend a high mountain above the plane of everyday life to find enlightenment. Wisdom waits for you at the doorstep of your household. Wisdom walks with you down the busy streets of your life.

There is a story of a king and a peasant who are told by one of God's angels that God will reveal Himself to them in any way they desire. The king replies. Being a king how else would I want God to be revealed except in all majesty, power and glory? And instantly

God granted the king's wish being revealed as a lightning bolt that pulverized the king and all his court so that not even one cinder was left. Then the angel went to the peasant and said how do you wish for God to be revealed to you? And the peasant said, "I am a poor man and not worthy to see God face to face. But if it is God's will to be revealed to me, let it be in those things with which I am familiar. Let me see God in the earth I plough, the water I drink, and the food I eat. Let me see the presence of God in the faces of my family, neighbors and – if God deems it as good for myself and others – even in my own reflection as well. God granted the peasant his wish, and he lived a long and a happy life.

What keeps us from finding wisdom? What keeps Wisdom from finding us? I believe that one obstacle that blocks us from the wisdom we desire, is our refusal to trust the wisdom that has already been given us. Let me explain what I mean. I find that when I look back on significant turning points or crossroads in my journey, in which I have sought wisdom about how to live my life, the wisdom that I have sought is often something that has already been disclosed to me. It is not a new wisdom that I needed to be revealed but the practice of an old wisdom that I have neglected. A question that I have put to God many times over the years has been this: "how do I remain spiritually centered in the midst of all the stresses and demands on my life?" I am guessing that I am not the only person who asks that question. Now is the answer to our question likely to be some new revelation? Maybe. But more likely the answer may be found in things we have already discovered about ourselves. The wisdom I need is found in the practice of wisdom I already know. If I want to be spiritually centered then I need to practice what I know about setting aside time for exercise, for solitude, for spiritual replenishment; and dare I say it- for prayer. The beginning of wisdom then is found in those who return again and again to the wisdom that has already been given to us.

Yes it is hard to trust what we know. But it is even more difficult for us to trust what we do not know. Why are we afraid to trust what we do not know? Maybe it is because we are afraid to make mistakes. We are afraid to take risks because we might fail. But it is only then through making mistakes and errors that we create the space that allows wisdom to grow. To trust the voice of wisdom within us, we must again and again summon the courage to risk what we do know in order to learn what we do not yet know. The beginning of wisdom is found in those who are willing to push out on the borders of what they know to create space for new learning. The Wise person is one who gleans the truth that lies hidden in the particularities of our day to day existence. The wise person is she who is able to glean truth from both the good and the bad experiences of life, the successes and failures. The little book "Letters to a young poet" by Rainer Maria Rilke has been a source of great wisdom for me. These letters written by the Rilke to one young friend, an aspiring poet has offered wisdom to countless others, young and old. Here is one bit of Rilke's wise counsel to his young friend. "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it live along some distant day into the answer". Live the questions Rilke reminds us. What wisdom requires of us is a commitment to the work of self-examination. For finally, wisdom is nothing more than our willingness to listen to our

own life. Wisdom is given to those who are willing to accept the lifelong task of exploring and coming to know the vast and mysterious universe of your own heart.

Before I close, there is an irony in the story of Solomon that begs to be told. No matter how earnestly Solomon desired wisdom at the beginning of his reign, by the end Solomon had abandoned Wisdom in pursuit of the wealth and opulence of his regime. Yes, Solomon prayed for wisdom instead of riches, and God decided to give him both. But if you read the rest of the book of Kings according to the OT theologian Walter Bruggemann, you find Solomon portrayed not as the wise one, but as the great consumer. *"More than his father before him, Solomon lived a life of ease, complacency, and self-indulgence. He wanted and needed more of everything than any one else. He felt himself entitled to more gold and silver, more spices and fine linens, more horses and chariots more wives and concubines, more state slaves and to top it off more of God to legitimate it all with a temple of splendor, presence and show"*. Solomon's predicament was and is the predicament of the prosperous. Solomon's witness to us may ultimately be a cautionary one because by the end of his life, Solomon had forgotten all that wisdom had taught him about who he was, where he came from and what he was called to do. The lesson that Solomon teaches us is that a heart set on material wealth and consumption, is not a heart that is seeking wisdom. Greed is the enemy of wisdom. A wise teacher once said, "consider the lilies of the field how they grow, they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these". These words are not a poetic sentimentality but a prophetic challenge to the prosperous. Jesus was saying and is saying to all that have ears to hear: a human life adorned in wisdom is far more beautiful than all the riches of the world. May God grant us all the wisdom of new eyes, the ability to see our lives and the world around us through the eyes of God.