

© John H. Young, 2024. This sermon may be reproduced, in part or in whole, and by any means, for personal use, group study, or similar non-commercial purposes without charge or further permission. Credit should be given for group use. Commercial reproduction and distribution are prohibited except with the written permission of John H. Young.

Joint Service—Bridge Street United Church and St. Matthew’s United Church

August 18, 2024

Readings: I Kings 2:1-4, 10-12; I Kings 3:1-15; Psalm 111

“Ask What I Should Give You”

The summer following my eighth birthday, my parents ceased to be renters and bought the house I think of as home. An elderly widow sold them her house and contents. Among the “contents” was a bookcase in my bedroom. The previous owner had left behind two books belonging to her son—H.G. Wells’s *The Outline of History*, not exactly bedtime reading for an eight year old, and *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, this volume supplemented by “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” and “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp.”

I was reminded of “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp” when I read the part of today’s story where, in Solomon’s dream, God says to him: “Ask What I Should Give You.” In “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp,” a genie appears who is willing to grant Aladdin three wishes. God does not grant Solomon three wishes. But it is a remarkable story, all the same, God appearing to Solomon in a dream and saying to him: “Ask what I should give you.”

I want to look at this story and highlight a few aspects of it, before looking more specifically at Solomon’s answer. Solomon’s answer and God’s response to it are instructive, I think, for thinking about God’s gifts to us and how we use those gifts.

I want to start with a few comments about the picture we get of Solomon in I Kings. The passage Allen read for us from chapter 2 tells of Solomon becoming king. Chapters 1 and 2 in their entirety tell of the struggle Solomon and his older half-brother, Adonijah, for the throne, each claimant supported by key figures from the days of King David’s rule. Solomon, in a series of moves described in chapter 2, has Adonijah killed as well as some key figures from David’s day who either

supported Adonijah or who might themselves become rivals. In chapters 3-10, we find a succession of stories that celebrate Solomon's wisdom and his reign. The stories about Solomon conclude in chapter 11, where Solomon begins to worship other gods and thus, according to the writer, to do what was displeasing to God.

But chapter 3, on which I want to focus, comes from that section where Solomon acts wisely and is celebrated and praised for doing so. Of all the stories about Solomon, his requests to God who comes to him in a dream is one of the most attractive and, arguably, one of the most significant for us in terms of thinking about our own lives and our own time.

In chapter 3, Solomon goes to Gibeon, a city that, the Biblical record indicates, had sought to make peace with the people of Israel when they first entered the Promised Land. Gibeon and its residents had subsequently become part of the people and territory of Israel. Solomon has a dream while he is there, a dream in which God appears to him. You may remember that Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, that is the Joseph who is Jacob's son, all had dreams in which God appeared to them. But God appearing in a dream to a Biblical character is not as common as we might initially think. There are other examples, but it is less, rather than more, common. So God appearing in this way is significant, and a sign of God's blessing. The text indicates that Solomon had been following God's way in general, though he offered sacrifices "at the high places." "Sacrificing at the high places" meant you were offering sacrifices to other gods who were worshipped "at the high places." Thus, there is already here an indication of what will be seen as Solomon's greatest failure later in the Solomon stories. But Solomon would appear, in this story, to have pleased God sufficiently that God comes and makes this quite astonishing offer to Solomon: "Ask what I should give you."

Solomon asks for "an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" In other words, he asks for the wisdom he needs to govern well. As one commentator I read put it, he chooses relationships over things—

relationships over things. There are things—food, shelter, clothing, and I could go on—that each of us needs. But there are needs, and then there are wants. Solomon in this story chooses to ask for the wisdom he needs to govern well, to carry out the duties of the position in which he finds himself. The references to Solomon being a child are not true literally, of course. He is probably in his early twenties in this story. This is Solomon in his response expressing humility, the fact that he needs this wisdom from God if he is to rule well. The same is true of the comment about not knowing how to go out or come in. “Going out and coming in” was language in that time and culture about one’s ability to offer leadership, especially military leadership. One who could no longer “go out and come in” was one who was no longer able, for reasons of increased age or some other factor, to offer solid, effective leadership.

But what makes Solomon great in this story is both his humility and his decision to ask for that which would enable him to serve others, that is, to serve others effectively in the role in which he found himself.

God’s response in the story is interesting. In the dream God tells Solomon that because he has not asked for riches, or honour, or success in battle, “but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word.” And the Solomon we see in the subsequent chapters is a figure of wisdom and discernment. That is the source of the phrase “as wise as Solomon.” But, in the story, God also gives Solomon those things for which Solomon did not ask, namely riches and honour. And then there is a conditional promise to Solomon: “If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.” In the understanding of those who composed this section of Scripture, Solomon had become king by virtue of the guarantee God had given to David that one of his sons would succeed him as king. Solomon here is given wisdom, plus riches and honour, because he requested

not something for himself but something that would benefit others. But God promises him a long life on the condition that he keep God's statutes and commandments.

In reflecting what this story might mean for us, I would start with the observation that Solomon is, like his father David, a flawed figure. Indeed, I think the Biblical picture reveals a figure more flawed in many ways than David. But the way Solomon responds to God's question in the dream recounted in chapter 3 is, unquestionably, a moment of greatness. What I think is instructive for us is that God makes these gifts to a flawed figure. I have mentioned in other sermons that we tend to look at Biblical figures as either more saintly than we could possibly be or as figures at the opposite end of that spectrum. But most of them are so very much like us, a mixture of strengths and of human frailties.

So what about us? Solomon becomes king because of God's unconditional promise to David. And despite Solomon's flaws, God makes these gifts, the gift of wisdom something Solomon requested in order that he might better fulfill his responsibilities in governing the people of Israel.

In the Christian tradition, we believe that God loves us unconditionally and that that unconditional love is something known to us through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That unconditional love of God for us does not mean we always do what God would wish or live as God would have us live. Martin Luther, a key leader in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, described this situation as each one of us being, at one and the same time, justified and sinner. By "justified," Luther meant being in right relationship with God. At the same time we were flawed, sinners who would make mistakes. But, like Solomon, God gives us gifts. Luther believed that we were to be Christ to our neighbours. That would be a key way in which we would use those gifts God gives us.

Solomon's example is also instructive in terms of the types of gifts we might seek and the purpose for which we seek them. Solomon sought the things that would help him in the role in which he found himself, and in the tasks to which he was called.

What would be our three wishes if we had the magic lamp or the magic ring of the Aladdin story? What would we ask God to give us if God appeared to us in a dream, as happened to Solomon? It is an important question. There are things all of us want—good health, sufficient food, a comfortable place to live, a good environment around us that is free from the violence and destruction we see on TV or when we go online and read on a website about events along the Russia-Ukraine border or in Gaza, the chance to relax and enjoy a break from our routine, whatever that routine may be, and with whatever it is that feeds our souls. Those are all good and necessary things. But if we had Solomon's experience, for what would we ask? It is a question the answer to which orients our living; indeed, it shapes our lives. If the answer is money, not what we need to live comfortably, but always more and more money, that shapes us. If it is recognition or fame, that, too, shapes us. What would we ask God to give us, regardless of our age? Then there is the follow-up question, "How do we use the particular gifts and talents we have?" With great consistency, Jesus' teachings make clear we should use those in the service of others.

That service can take many forms. I look at the display in front of me this morning—the backpack programme that has been part of the work and witness of this congregation for some time. Or the Food Pantry and the lunch programmes that run from this church. Or the Food Programme at Bridge Street that goes back to at least the early 1990s, or the Drop-in, or the effort of over forty years ago now on the part of members of Bridge Street United Church to build the Quinte Living Centre. Those are collective uses of the gifts of many individuals through these congregations. Then there is the use of our gifts and talents for others that we make individually in our day-to-day lives.

I am always grateful for the gifts of those who offer themselves for public service, even when I find myself in disagreement with the policies of some of them. Sometimes what we are called to do with the use of our gifts and talents means the giving of financial resources—I think again about the items I see in front of me. And sometimes it is about the giving of another precious resource—our time. I think here, as but one example, of the persons at Bridge Street who have prepared our monthly coffee/cake/conversation times or those who volunteer week in and week out in the Food Programme that operates at Bridge Street. Sometimes it is the card and the note to someone who is ill or in hospital, or the dropping in and talking with the neighbour who lives in the next house or the next apartment and who is having a tough time.

Solomon lived in a society in which kings, in particular, were judged “successful” on the basis of the wealth they accumulated, the number of chariots they could maintain in their army, the size and elegance of the palace in which they lived, and a number of other material things I could name. Solomon did not ask God for those things, but for what would enable him to serve, most effectively, the people in his care. We live in a society that, in a way similar to Solomon’s, judges people on the basis of their financial resources and societal status. Like Solomon, I think we are called to a better way. After all, we seek to serve a God who loves us unconditionally, our mistakes and our times of failure notwithstanding. And it is to that God, who has made us, who has become known to us most fully in Jesus the Christ, and who is with us now and always through the Holy Spirit, that we offer honour, glory, and praise, this day and forever, Amen.

Resources

Nelson, Richard D. *First and Second Kings*: Louisville, John Knox Press, 1987.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/>; accessed August 13, 2024.